SHAKESPEARE'S "HAMLET"

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BY

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PREFACE

THE theory of *Hamlet*, which I state in the second chapter of this book, was first suggested to me by a performance of the play which Mr. William Poel gave some years before the war in the Little Theatre. It left out a good deal of the play and was imperfect in execution; but it seemed to me right in conception, and suddenly I understood Hamlet, or thought I did, and saw that it was not a puzzle but a masterpiece. I then tried to explain my understanding in an analysis of the play, but did not publish it because, I thought, enough and more than enough had been written about Hamlet. I am provoked to publish it now, after rewriting it, by the theories of Mr. J. M. Robertson and Mr. T. S. Eliot, with which I deal in my first chapter and which imply, or assert, that *Hamlet* is not a masterpiece at all, but an accident or a failure. Mr. Eliot's criticism, in particular, seems to me to

be based on a misunderstanding, not only of this play, but of the whole nature of art; and I am convinced by other criticism which I have read, that such misunderstanding is a common obstacle to the experience of art. I have therefore added a last chapter on *Hamlet* as an æsthetic document. I must make general acknowledgments to Mr. Bradley, whose essay on *Hamlet* I have mentioned once or twice; for it may be that I owe more to it than I know.

A. CLUTTON-BROCK

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SHAKESPEARE'S "HAMLET"

CHAPTER I

The Case against "Hamlet"

THOUGH *Hamlet* is the most acted, and discussed, of all Shakespeare's plays, perhaps of all plays that have ever been written, yet there is a case against it; and that case can best be stated in a question—What is the cause of Hamlet's delay in killing the King? It has been asked for two hundred years; in 1736 Hanmer, Mr. Bradley tells us, remarked that "there appears no reason at all in nature why this young Prince did not put the usurper to death as soon as possible"; and he continues, "If Shakespeare had made the young man go naturally to work, there would have been no play at all."[1] If this is so, then the case against *Hamlet* is proved; for a play, that can be prolonged only if the hero does

[1] The words quoted occur in an anonymous pamphlet. It is only conjecture that Sir Thomas Hanmer, an editor of Shakespeare, wrote them.

not go naturally to work, is bad in conception. But most of those who have discussed the delay have not accepted Hanmer's reason for it; they have found the cause either in Hamlet's circumstances or in his character; they say that he could not kill the King because he was so well guarded, or that he suffered from some mental impediment to the exercise of his will.

The first of these explanations would also condemn the play, if it were true; for it was Shakespeare's business to make us see that Hamlet was prevented by circumstances. But it is not true. The King, while praying, is exposed, unguarded, to Hamlet; and Hamlet himself says that he has means enough to kill him. His difficulty, whatever it may be, is not that. But, if the impediment is in his character, Shakespeare has still to meet the charge that he has not explained what that impediment is. He draws our attention to it, for Hamlet himself wonders why he does not kill the King; and writers, who have discussed the character of Hamlet, have given many reasons, some ingenious and some absurd but most of them subject to this objection, that they are guessed or imagined as if he were a

real man, a person of history, instead of a character in a play. The difficulty of the problem lies in the fact that he is a character in a play and that therefore we must look for the causes of his behaviour in that play; we know nothing about him except what is in it, for there is nothing else to know. Why then has Shakespeare left the causes of his behaviour obscure to us, if he has left them obscure; why has he insisted that they were obscure to Hamlet himself?

Mr. J. M. Robertson has lately written a book, *The Problem of Hamlet*, in which he returns to Hanmer's answer, though he gives reasons for it which Hanmer did not give. The cause of the delay,[1] he says, is to be found, not in Hamlet's character nor in his circumstances, but in the circumstances of the play. Shakespeare, when he wrote *Hamlet*, was revising an old play, in which the young prince did not put the usurper to death as soon as possible, for the very reasons given by Hanmer. Shakespeare "simply decided to accept inexplicable delay as the formula of a play which

[1] Mr. Robertson also is inclined to deny even the fact of the delay; but that point I discuss in an Appendix.

reached him with that character apparently stamped upon it." This old play does not exist; but, as Mr Robertson says, it certainly did exist in Shakespeare's time and was, very likely, written by Thomas Kyd, the author of *The Spanish Tragedy*—Mr. Robertson ingeniously conjectures the character of this play both from Kyd's other works and from a German play, *Der Bestrafte Brodermord*, which may have been a version of it. The German play, which I have not read, appears from Mr. Robertson's account of it to be a crude drama of revenge delayed by expedients; and, as Mr. Robertson says, we should expect from Kyd a "delayed revenge as in the *Tragedy*, but a revenge delayed simply—or partly—through lack of opportunity or fear of miscarriage, as in that case," though this would not be "inexplicable delay." Certainly we should not expect a play, or a character, at all like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It will be seen, therefore, that, since we know nothing of Kyd's play, the extent of its influence upon *Hamlet* must be conjecture; and further that, if indeed the delay in *Hamlet* is simply an inheritance from Kyd for which Shakespeare fails to account, then *Hamlet* is

not the masterpiece it has always been called, and the problem is not one of Hamlet's conduct but of Shakespeare's misconduct.

Mr. Robertson conjectures that Kyd did account for the delay in some crude, mechanical, way, such as lack of opportunity, or fear of miscarriage, but that Shakespeare, for reasons which are difficult to understand, left out Kyd's explanation without providing one of his own; in fact left Hamlet himself wondering why he did not kill the King, and has left us all wondering ever since with good reason, since the cause was to be found, not in *Hamlet* at all, but in the lost work of Kyd.

If this is true, the proof of it is to be found only in *Hamlet*; and Mr. Robertson tries to find it there. But a great part of his ingenious attempt is irrelevant, since it is not concerned with the delay, but with other matters. He believes, for instance, that Kyd's play was in two parts and that *Hamlet* is so long because Shakespeare crowded the two parts into one; but that has nothing to do with the problem of the delay, unless we suppose that Shakespeare was forced to crowd out all Kyd's explanations of that delay; in which case he was merely

incompetent. Then, he says, there are irrelevant scenes in *Hamlet* which survive from Kyd; but these, if they exist, also have nothing to do with the problem of the delay; and why did Shakespeare retain them if he was forced to crowd out Kyd's explanations? One of them is the scene between Reynaldo and Polonius, which Mr. Robertson calls purposeless. But, not only does it come immediately after the great scene between Hamlet and the Ghost, to which it is a relief; it also leads into the first scene between Polonius and Ophelia; and it exhibits Polonius fussing about both of his children. We have no right to suspect it unless it is irrelevant beyond Shakespeare's usage, which it is not.[1] But Mr. Robertson is in a difficulty with this scene since there is nothing in it that suggests Kyd's method, let alone his style. He therefore conjectures that it was inserted by Chapman (and perhaps revised by Shakespeare) because "such irrelevant scene-writing is the speciality of Chapman." But he has begun by supposing that the scene is

[1] In *Hamlet* itself the passage about the child-actors is much more irrelevant but is certainly Shakespeare's, since it refers to events later than the possible date of the old play.

irrelevant in Hamlet because it is a survival from Kyd's play, in which there is no reason to suppose it was irrelevant. He is here torn between his desire to prove the influence of Kyd by the survival of matter irrelevant to Shakespeare's play, and his theory that Chapman was a kind of "affable, familiar ghost" who went about inserting irrelevant scenes in other men's plays. But he can't have it both ways. If the irrelevance of the scene is a proof that it survives from Kyd's play, it cannot be a product of Chapman's passion for irrelevance. Chapman may just as well have played his tricks on Shakespeare as on Kyd.

Mr. Robertson also speculates about the Fortinbras episodes; but these, whether or no they are irrelevant, have nothing to do with the problem of Hamlet's delay. They are, he says, "in no way necessary, as the play stands, to the final action; and, for that very reason, to suppose that Shakespeare invented them is to impute to him a kind of gratuitous mismanagement impossible to him as a practical playwright. Rather we must assume that they too were given him; and pronounce that his error lay in retaining them." This is a curious

argument coming from Mr. Robertson, who imputes to Shakespeare a gratuitous mismanagement much greater. A few superfluous scenes in an Elizabethan play matter little, if they are short; for the Elizabethan method, and particularly Shakespeare's, is a swift succession of scenes changing easily from one into another. There is no pretence of giving a whole story but rather a search-light seems to be thrown here and there upon a moving stream of events; it is a method which must be understood if we are to understand Shakespeare's stage-craft or the manner in which his plays should be acted. But it does matter much, in Elizabethan as in any drama, if, in the revision of a play, the delay in the main action is retained but the causes of it are not. That would indeed be gratuitous mismanagement, impossible to Shakespeare or indeed to anyone. I am not concerned to deny that the Fortinbras episodes may have been retained from the earlier play; but the fact that they are usually cut out of modern performances does not prove them irrelevant; modern performances usually reconstruct *Hamlet* into a different kind of play, losing the swift succession

of scenes and the search-light effect for the sake of scenery and spectacle. One would need to see *Hamlet* performed as Shakespeare meant it to be performed, before one could judge what, if anything, was irrelevant in it. But, even if everything is irrelevant which Mr. Robertson calls so, that would only go to prove that Shakespeare did rewrite an old play, which is not denied; it would not prove that, from mere carelessness or incompetence, he decided to accept inexplicable delay as the formula of the play, especially if, in the old play, the delay was, however mechanically, explained.

But Mr. Robertson seems to think that Shakespeare was, in some way, *compelled* thus to retain the formula of delay, while dropping the reasons for it. "It is easy to show that, while Shakespeare is certainly capable of oversight and of occasional confusion, in this case he has suffered or accepted compulsion imposed by material which, as a stage manager revising a popular play of marked action, he did not care to reject." What was this compulsion? If there was any compulsion at all, it must have been given a certain plot, to retain the

dramatic essence of that plot and not to retain certain scenes and episodes which, according to Mr. Robertson, are clearly superfluous. There was nothing to prevent Shakespeare from cutting out the Fortinbras and the Reynaldo episodes; there was everything to prevent him from cutting out the very mainspring of the plot, without finding another to put in its place. Mr. Robertson does not suggest that Shakespeare was in a hurry; he admits that "In *Hamlet*, the first of the great plays in which Shakespeare fully reveals his supremacy, there is far more evidence of superabundant power, and of keen interest in the main theme than of haste or carelessness." Therefore, if Shakespeare did ignore Kyd's causes for the delay, he must have had his reasons for doing so; it was not a matter of compulsion at all. Shakespeare, when he wrote *Hamlet*, was no longer the mere "factotum" that Green called him about ten years before; he was, perhaps, the most successful playwright of his time. If he chose to rewrite an old play, he could make what he would of it; he did rewrite the whole of *Hamlet*, and, on Mr. Robertson's own showing, so freely that he left out an essential part of

Kyd's play. What then becomes of the notion that, while leaving it out, he was "compelled" to put nothing else in to take its place?

(There is evidence, perhaps, that Shakespeare took more pains with *Hamlet* than with any other play, in the fact that there exists an earlier version of it, the Quarto of 1603. I am not concerned here to discuss the difficult problem of that earlier version, which seems to consist partly of Shakespeare's work garbled and partly of fragments of the older play, because there is much uncertainty about the manner in which it came into being. There is, at any rate, no reason to suppose that it gives us a version of the play which was at any time Shakespeare's own version. It seems rather a hotch-potch of Shakespeare and the older play, put together perhaps by some one who got Shakespeare's part of it furtively as well as imperfectly. Our document for Shakespeare's intentions and procedure is only *Hamlet* in its final versions; and this, I think, Mr. Robertson himself would allow. I therefore ignore the 1603 Quarto, except to say that, if it proves anything at all about Shakespeare's *Hamlet*,

which I doubt, it proves only that he made an earlier version which he afterwards revised, and therefore that he took unusual pains with it.)

Mr. Robertson insists in the passage I have quoted from him that Kyd's *Hamlet* was a play of marked action. His theory seems to be that Shakespeare was compelled to retain that marked action as being the essence of the play; he means, I suppose, that the audience would have resented the absence of incidents to which they were accustomed; they would have said it was *Hamlet*, not without the Prince of Denmark, but without the ghost, the madness, the sudden deaths; it was not Hamlet himself that interested them but these things. Shakespeare, however, whatever compulsion he was subject to, was interested in Hamlet himself; and he has succeeded so well in communicating his interest to us that "*Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark" means something with the point left out. We may assume that for Shakespeare, as for us, the character of Hamlet was the thing. In spite of all the compulsion put on him, he did try to transform the play from one of incident into one of character; and Mr. Robertson admits

that he succeeded, although he was forced to exhibit that character through a series of incidents for which there remains no adequate cause. Mr. Robertson, indeed, praises the play as much as he blames it, and even more. Kyd, he says, had complicated a crude and simple old story with delays which he explained mechanically and not psychologically; "Shakespeare by immensely heightening the character (of Hamlet) puts it into still further irrelation with the action, giving us one great satisfaction in forgoing another." But could we be satisfied with a play in which the hero, more predominant perhaps than any hero in any other play whatever, was out of relation with the action, and that action of extreme violence? Mr. Robertson seems to think we could, because, in fact, the world has been satisfied with *Hamlet* as a play, in spite of his theory about it. Shakespeare's triumph was, he says, "to turn a crude play into the masterpiece which he has left us. It is a perfectly magnificent *tour de force*, and its ultimate æsthetic miscarriage is only the supreme illustration of the vulgar but ancient truth that an entirely satisfactory silken purse

cannot be constructed, even by a Shakespeare, out of a sow's ear."

But Mr. Robertson is a very honest as well as a learned writer, and, whatever we may think of his case, we cannot complain of the manner in which he presents it. He states his evidence accurately, and, what is more difficult, states fairly the deductions he draws from it. He does not deny the merits of *Hamlet* and is, indeed, hampered throughout by his acknowledgment of them. Though I think him mistaken, I have learned much from his book; and his examination of the current theories about Hamlet's character is both just and amusing.

Another critic who has lately attacked Hamlet, does not share his scruples or make his admissions. Mr. T. S. Eliot's "Hamlet and his Problems," published in his volume of essays, *The Sacred Wood*, is based on Mr. Robertson's book, but he comes to the conclusion, rather, I suspect, from reading that book than from reading *Hamlet*, that the play, "so far from being Shakespeare's masterpiece, is most certainly an artistic failure." "Probably," he thinks, "more people have found *Hamlet*

a work of art because they have found it interesting, than have found it interesting because they have found it a work of art." That is, indeed, the natural process; but Mr. Eliot reverses it on principle and finds that *Coriolanus* is a greater play than *Hamlet*. He does not quite dare to say that he finds it more interesting; and, if he did, it would be difficult to believe him.

Mr. Eliot qualifies the word *failure* by the word *artistic*, no doubt because he remembers that for three centuries *Hamlet* has been, in every other respect, the most successful play that ever was written. That may be the reason why he is resolved to find it an artistic failure; for his arguments raise the suspicion that his conclusion is based, not on them, but on some strong, unconscious wish to reach that conclusion. These arguments are partly taken from Mr. Robertson, though not stated with his accuracy, and partly Mr. Eliot's own. Of the manner in which he uses Mr. Robertson's arguments, I will give two examples.

He contends that *Hamlet* "is superposed upon much cruder material which persists even in the final form"; and, in proof of that con-

tention, he says that there are in the final version of *Hamlet* "verbal parallels so close to *The Spanish Tragedy* as to leave no doubt that in places Shakespeare was merely *revising* the text of Kyd." What are these parallels which prove revision? Mr. Robertson gives several parallels between Kyd and *Hamlet* but most of them are between Kyd and the Quarto of 1603. He says himself of the two most important that they disappear in the Second Quarto and the Folio, and that they are plainly Kyd's. One of them indeed is in a speech of the Queen's where she agrees to help Hamlet against the King. It does not belong to Shakespeare's conception of the play at all and is a proof of his departure from the older play, not of his compulsion to follow it. I would ask the reader to remember that no one denies the existence of an older play, or that Shakespeare did, in some respects, follow it, or that traces and fragments of this older play are to be found in the 1603 Quarto. But Mr. Eliot's contention goes much further than that; it is that *Hamlet* is an artistic failure because Shakespeare was revising a play of Kyd's and

that the cruder material persists in his final form. Where are the parallels in the final version of *Hamlet* which prove this? Mr. Robertson does give some parallels between Kyd and the final *Hamlet* and I will give them too, so that the reader may test Mr. Eliot's assertion for himself—

Kyd, in *The Spanish Tragedy* has—

> "And if the world like not this Tragedy,
> Hard is the hap of old Hieronimo."

Hamlet (Act III. Scene II.) says—

> "For if the King like not the comedy,
> Why then, belike,—he likes it not, perdy."

Here I wonder that Mr. Robertson, at least, has not seen that Shakespeare was actually quoting, and misquoting, Kyd, and meaning the audience to see it. Just before, Hamlet has quoted two stanzas, probably from old ballads, and has clearly misquoted the last line of the second stanza—"A very, very—pajock"; after which Horatio says "You might have rhymed." So Hamlet reverses the process of misquotation and rhymes where Kyd had not rhymed. Mr. Robertson notes that the Quarto of 1603

reads—"For if the King like not the *Tragedy*," following Kyd more closely. We may conjecture that some one here, whether the printer or the procurer of the version, recognized the quotation from Kyd and thought that *Comedy* was a mistake for *Tragedy*, or else did not notice Shakespeare's difference. The suggestion that Shakespeare was here retaining a line of Kyd's (which Kyd himself must have copied from another play of his own) because he would not be at the pains to write his own play, and that in a scene of the greatest moment where he is at the height of his powers, is —well, I do not think it needs discussing.

As for the other parallels—there are two, taken, not from *The Spanish Tragedy* but from *Soliman and Perseda*—

Kyd. "Fair locks resembling Phœbus' radiant beams,
Smooth forehead like the table of high Jove."

Shakespeare. "Hyperion's curls; the front of Jove himself."

and

Kyd. "Importing health and wealth of Soliman.

Shakespeare. "Importing Denmark's health and England's too."

These do not seem to me to be parallels at all; but I give them because Mr. Robertson gives them, noting that in the first there are no verbal identities except the word *Jove*—and Mr. Eliot speaks of verbal parallels—and that in the second only the unremarkable words *health* and *importing* are the same. If Shakespeare did remember these from *Soliman and Perseda*, he may well have done so unconsciously; there is no proof, and no reason to believe, that he was retaining them from Kyd.

These, so far as I know, are the only alleged parallels between Kyd and the final version of Hamlet; at least Mr. Robertson gives no others, and he is usually to be trusted to do all that can be done in the way of parallels, and even a little more. Mr. Eliot himself gives none at all, but only asserts that they exist and are so close as to leave no doubt that Shakespeare was in places revising the text of Kyd. By such methods I could prove, I think, that *Paradise Lost* was a revision of the text of a (lost) poem by Sylvester, or indeed by any poet who wrote before Milton.

Mr. Eliot's next argument for a revised text is stranger but not stronger. Still following,

or seeming to follow, Mr. Robertson, he says that "finally there are unexplained scenes—the Polonius-Laertes, and the Polonius-Reynaldo scenes—for which there is little excuse; these scenes are not in the verse style of Kyd, and not beyond doubt in the style of Shakespeare." I have already dealt with the Reynaldo scene; and Mr. Robertson does not speak of the Polonius-Laertes scene at all, for the very good reason that there is no such scene in *Hamlet.* There is, of course, the famous speech of Polonius in which he gives advice to Laertes; but how Mr. Eliot comes to speak of it as the Polonius-Laertes scene, or to couple it with the Reynaldo scene as unexplained or without excuse, I do not understand. It consists of 31 lines and comes in the middle of a scene, first between Laertes and Ophelia, and then between Polonius and Ophelia, which contains 135 lines and is entirely relevant to the play. Mr. Eliot, I take it, does not condemn the whole scene; for, if he did, he might as well condemn the whole play as being by Kyd with irrelevances supplied, like the "lyrics" in a musical comedy, by Chapman. Therefore

what he condemns is the speech of Polonius, which, for the purposes of his argument, he calls the Polonius-Laertes scene; and this speech, though not in the style of Kyd and probably inserted by Chapman in his passion for irrelevance, is for him a proof that Shakespeare was merely revising the text of Kyd.

But he has also psychological arguments to which I will give some attention, because they are of a kind very common in modern criticism and because they involve a common æsthetic fallacy. They are inconsistent with his other arguments because they imply that Shakespeare was not merely revising a play by Kyd. "Shakespeare's *Hamlet*," he says, "so far as it is Shakespeare's, is a play dealing with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son, and Shakespeare was unable to impose this motive successfully upon the intractable material of the old play." Here, to begin with, is the commonest of all critical errors. The motive of the play is discovered and defined — it is the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son — and then we are told that the play is a failure because that

motive will not explain everything in the play. But you have no right thus to discover motives in a play as if it were a history of real persons. Certainly the effect of Gertrude's guilt upon Hamlet is part of the play, but only so much as appears in the play itself. Because Mr. Eliot thinks it ought to dominate everything, while, in fact, it does not dominate everything, he says that Shakespeare was unable to impose this motive on the intractable material of the old play. But he thinks that Shakespeare was also trying to express in *Hamlet* something he could not express. "*Hamlet*, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art." How does Mr. Eliot know this? "Hamlet, the man," he says, "is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear." Here I would ask the reader to remember the facts. Hamlet has learned, and from his father's Ghost, that that father has been murdered by his brother; and further that his father's wife, and his own mother, has been the paramour of the murderer, whom she married within two

months of the murder. Could any emotion be in excess of these facts? But Mr. Eliot then puts his case another way. Hamlet, he says, is baffled "by the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings"; which no doubt is true, and which means, not that his emotion is in excess of the facts, but that it is, naturally, so great that he cannot express it in any normal speech or action. Consequently he does not express it as Mr. Eliot, and others, would expect him to express it. That being so, Mr. Eliot concludes that his bafflement is "a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem." But Shakespeare's artistic problem was to make Hamlet behave as he would behave in those circumstances, and out of his behaviour to make a play. The question is whether or no he has done this, not whether Mr. Eliot, or anyone else, is unable to explain his behaviour in psychological terms.

The play would be an artistic failure if, seeing it acted on the stage, we found ourselves asking—"Why does Hamlet behave thus?" or protesting—"But he would not behave thus." No one, I think, has ever made that

protest. Mr. Eliot himself does not make it; and, as for the question, it is asked often enough, but not, I think, during our actual æsthetic experience of the play. That is to say, it is not an æsthetic problem at all but an intellectual, a psychological, problem, such as might arise about the behaviour of anyone in real life; and it arises just because Hamlet convinces us so utterly while we are æsthetically experiencing the play.

But Mr. Eliot takes this intellectual for an æsthetic problem. Because "none of the possible actions can satisfy Hamlet" therefore "nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him"; and the conclusion is—"We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him." Again, because there is an intellectual problem which proves too much for Mr. Eliot, he concludes that the æsthetic problem has proved too much for Shakespeare. But was any character in drama ever *expressed* more completely than Hamlet? He may not be *explained*, to Mr. Eliot's satisfaction; but that was not Shakespeare's task. It is the essence of the tragedy that none of

the possible actions can satisfy Hamlet, and for reasons which I shall try to explain in my second chapter; but, though Hamlet's behaviour may seem to us unintelligible psychologically, we are, æsthetically, convinced by it. As he acts, we feel, so he would act; and that is all we have a right to demand of the dramatist. There is no play that gives us a stronger feeling of certainty, and this must come from Shakespeare himself. He knew what Hamlet would do, though he did not know why he would do it; he saw Hamlet actually doing it, saw him speaking, thinking, feeling and acting, as if he were a real man; and so makes him real to us. Mr. Eliot says in an essay on Massinger, what he should have remembered in his essay on Hamlet, that "what the creator of a character needs is not so much knowledge of motives as keen sensibility; the dramatist need not understand people but he must be exceptionally aware of them." Shakespeare, I think, was more aware of Hamlet than of any other of his characters; he even gives to Hamlet a peculiar style of his own, a way of speaking which is his and no one else's, both in verse and in prose, and this awareness is what makes

the play so interesting to us. Shakespeare himself was in love with the character and puts us in love with him, though he does many things which trouble us. In fact the tragedy lies in this, that he does so many things which trouble us, which seem contrary to his real character; and yet we never doubt that he would do them.

Mr. Eliot, when he says that Shakespeare, like Hamlet himself, was baffled by his problem, seems to imply that Hamlet can do nothing; but, in fact he does many things, though they may not be what we expect him to do. If *Hamlet* were a play in which nothing happened but talk, and if all the talk without action wearied us, then Mr. Eliot would be right; but *Hamlet* is exciting as a bloody melodrama to those who see nothing else in it. So far from spoiling an old play by leaving out the point of it, Shakespeare, we cannot doubt, has surpassed it in that very excitement which was Kyd's strong point. Yet, with all this action, he is all the while discovering the character of Hamlet to us, not in spite of the action but through it. The more I consider the facts, the more I wonder what, when Mr. Eliot says

that the play is most certainly an artistic failure, he means by the word *artistic.*

He can only mean *scientific*; and, in fact, he condemns *Hamlet* because its success is so purely artistic, and prefers *Coriolanus* because it is far less purely a work of art. You can detach from *Coriolanus* a concept, a moral even; and you can therefore feel that the play is well wrought to illustrate this concept or this moral. You can say that a certain situation of universal interest is presented in it; and of this situation you can think apart from the play. But you cannot find any concept, any moral, any situation of universal interest in *Hamlet*, which can be detached from the play or thought of apart from it. The difference is this, that *Coriolanus* is made for its theme whereas *Hamlet* *is* its theme; and Mr. Eliot, like many other critics, prefers the former because it gives him something about which he can come to intellectual conclusions; whereas the latter only gives him a human being so vivid and moving that thought is baffled by him. *Coriolanus* is a descriptive play compared with *Hamlet*, which is creative; in *Coriolanus* we are aware of events more than of people, and the people

seem to be there to illustrate the events. But in *Hamlet* we are aware of Hamlet himself more than of any events—the events interest us because they happen to him—and it is only when he is no longer before us that we begin to discuss the events and their causes. I say—we are aware of Hamlet—because the predominance of the hero is a peculiarity, not a defect, of this play. The other characters are all living but, compared with him, they are slight; and they all seem to be there because of some point at which they contrast with him. In *Othello* Iago is a protagonist as well as Othello. In *King Lear* Cordelia, Goneril, the Fool and Edmund are remembered as clearly as Lear himself; in *Macbeth* there is also Lady Macbeth. But in *Hamlet* there is no one to compare with Hamlet; yet the play seems as fully populated as any other, for he fills it even when he is not on the stage.

So it is a great play and, as a work of art, a triumphant success in spite of the questions of all the critics. The business of drama is character and action, not psychology, which is science, not art. But action does not become action until performed by people who are

real to us; and, as the reality of the people is manifested in action, so the reality of the action depends on that of the people. You may, if you will, psychologize about Hamlet—I shall do so myself in the next chapter—you may seek for the cause of his actions within his mind; but you do so because they are to you the actions of a real man; and the fact that you may not see why he does them does not make them less real or less dramatic.

Othello is usually supposed to have been the next of the great tragedies composed after *Hamlet*; the same objection might be made to Iago that Mr. Eliot makes to Hamlet, and far more justly. His emotion does indeed seem to be in excess of the facts as they appear; yet he convinces us, although we may not be able to explain the connexion between his emotion and his action in psychological terms. Shakespeare himself seems to have been aware of this difficulty and, in this case, to have feared that the audience would be puzzled by it, would ask questions which he did not wish them to ask and which he could not answer in the play; for he makes Iago give reasons for his conduct which are certainly

not the true ones and which differ from time to time. These reasons, which are expressed in melodramatic terms, must have been meant for those of his audience who, like Mr. Eliot, were not content with the reality of a character but wanted to know why he did things. We may guess that Shakespeare had met a man like Iago—he has the air of being drawn from life—and had realized him completely; it was enough for him that he knew how Iago would behave in given circumstances, and, if he gave reasons for his behaviour, it was merely to remove from the minds of his audience obstructions to their æsthetic experience.

There is a hint of the same kind of false, but convenient, explanation in *Hamlet* also; for, after his interview with the Ghost, Hamlet says he may hereafter think fit to put an antic disposition on. It is not what the real Hamlet would say, but Shakespeare put it in to prevent questions, which it would do all the more surely because in the old play Hamlet had probably feigned madness to avert the suspicions of the King. Shakespeare does not give this reason, which would have been going too far in falsehood, since, in his play, the suspicions of

the King are aroused, rather than allayed, by Hamlet's antic disposition.

It may be thought that I have been too laborious in defending *Hamlet* against these attacks upon it; but the notions implied in them, that works of art are to be understood only through their history, and that they ought to answer questions which belong to science, are common obstructions to the experience of art. They need refuting, and can be better refuted in particular examples than in general terms. But there still remains the question—"Why did Hamlet delay to kill the King?"; and to that I wish to find an answer, so that it may no longer be an obstacle to anyone's experience of the play. Further, I believe that, the more fully we experience the play, the more we shall see that the delay, given the circumstances and Hamlet's character, is inevitable. During that experience we are not interested in the delay—indeed we hardly notice it—for, as in all the greatest dramas, what interests us is what is happening, not why it happens, or what is going to happen. We are absorbed by Hamlet himself and all that he says and does, which has the necessary

sequence of notes in a great piece of music. But still, I think, the delay may be explained in psychological terms; and a psychological understanding of it may even heighten our experience of the play. At any rate it will remove an æsthetic irrelevance; and that, though a humble task, is worth doing.

CHAPTER II

Why Hamlet delayed to kill the King

I WILL begin my explanation of the delay by laying down the principle that nothing which may be said about any character in a play is of any value unless it can be expressed by that character on the stage, or, at least, unless it is an assistance to the acting of that character; for characters in a play have no existence except in their parts, as figures in a picture have no existence except in the picture. But there is this difference between a play and a picture, that a play exists fully only when it is acted; it is like music and needs executants. So in a play there is more than the words, although often we can deduce that more only from the words. That is so in the case of *Hamlet*. We cannot doubt that to Shakespeare and his company the play was more than the words; he, being

a master of the stage, not only wrote the play but saw it being acted as he wrote it, and the words were only a part of it for him. They were communicated to the players in writing, but the rest of the play, the business, was communicated to them orally by Shakespeare himself; and this business was as much a part of the play as the words. Further, it is possible that all the business was not devised by Shakespeare; an executant may also be a creator and Burbage may have helped to create *Hamlct* in its fullest and most authentic life. He may here and there have seen more in his part than Shakespeare himself had seen; and Shakespeare may have joyfully consented to his discoveries.

So it is the business of an actor always, since a play lives fully only on the stage, to make what discoveries he can about his part. And this he must do, when all tradition of the original business is lost, out of the words alone. The test of his discoveries is, whether they can be acted, and whether they fit the part as the dramatist has written it. If they do, they may actually elucidate some obscurity in the words, may be a rediscovery of some business

with which the playwright himself explained the meaning of his words. But it is not only an actor who can make such discoveries or rediscoveries. It is open to anyone to say how he thinks a play or a part ought to be acted; for, in saying this, he gives his opinion of the real and full meaning of the play. He is not passing away from the play, or the character, into psychology or into an imagined history of the character as he was when off the stage. He is not, for instance, telling what Hamlet learned at Wittenburg; he is merely deducing the rest of the part from the words. But, if he goes beyond this and conjectures anything that could be of no use to a player, since it could neither be acted nor have any bearing on the acting, then he is wasting his own time and that of his readers.

This is the test I shall try to apply to my own explanation of Hamlet's delay. Can that explanation be acted, or would it help a player to act the part? Is it not only consistent with the words, but also an elucidation of them? If it is, then I am not passing into irrelevant science because I advance a psychological theory or use psychological terms of

which Shakespeare himself was ignorant. As he knew æsthetically what he did not know scientifically, so we may know scientifically what we do not know æsthetically; and we may make use of our science, our psychological formulæ, not to criticize him and find him wanting because he was ignorant of them, but to rediscover that part of his æsthetic purpose which has been lost with the original business of the play. I assume that the character of Hamlet has the consistency of a creation, that Shakespeare knew what he would do and made him do it. If I describe his behaviour in psychological terms, it is not with the aim of travelling beyond the play into speculation about a Hamlet who has no existence, but of discovering how his words ought to be supplemented with action and in what mood he ought to speak them.

Shakespeare's plays can be experienced as he meant them to be experienced only when they are acted. But a performance may be misleading, may cause us actually to read a play wrongly, to ignore some essential point in it which has been ignored in the performance. This I think has happened in the case of

Hamlet. In most performances of it that I have seen, the very text, and so the whole part of Hamlet, was misrepresented on an essential point. Hamlet was presented, except for a few unaccountable lapses from decorum and a few regrettable actions still more unaccountable, as a perfectly well-behaved English gentleman; whereas in the text it is all the other way. There Hamlet behaves outrageously except in some of the soliloquies, when he is alone with Horatio, in part of his interview with his mother, and in his converse with the players. In particular, his behaviour to Ophelia is obscene and cruel; and if this is toned down, if his dirty jokes in the play-scene are left out, as they usually are,[1] if his demeanour throughout is far more sympathetic than his actions or his words, then a Hamlet is presented to us who is not Shakespeare's at all, and who is not to be explained in terms either of his words or of his actions.

Yet the text is plain enough; for not only does Hamlet begin to behave wildly immediately after his interview with the Ghost;

[1] Of course such jokes were then common; but I do not think the normal Hamlet would have made them to Ophelia.

but, when dying, he insists that all through the play he has been misexpressing himself; and his last anxiety is that Horatio shall set him right with the world—

> Horatio, I am dead;
> Thou livest; report me and my cause aright
> To the unsatisfied.

And again, a few lines later—

> O good Horatio, what a wounded name,
> Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!
> If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
> To tell my story.

His anxiety cannot be merely that Horatio shall explain the external facts, the murder and his mother's unfaithfulness, which could be done in a few words. It is that Horatio shall make the world understand what he himself, now that his brain is cleared by approaching death and a task at last performed, understands so clearly that he thinks Horatio too must see it. He cannot tell his story because he is dying; he has strength only for one practical task, to recommend Fortinbras for King; and his last words are—"The rest is silence,"

meaning that he cannot say what he most wishes to say.

So the tragedy and the interest of Hamlet lie in the fact that, by some compulsion, he is forced to misexpress himself in action and in words. What is that compulsion? There has been much speculation about it, as that Hamlet was too much of a dreamer to act when violent action was demanded of him. This ignores the fact that he does act violently throughout the play and it does not explain his outrageous behaviour. It is based upon those very misrepresentations of Hamlet, as a well-behaved English gentleman, which ignore the text; and it is the result of a desire to draw some kind of moral lesson from the play, to prove that all these disasters happened because of some weakness in Hamlet's character. In fact, as Mr. Robertson says, Hamlet has been "scolded, as never hero was before, by literary persons conscious of their own consummate fitness for killing a guilty uncle at a moment's notice." Yet the causes of this compulsion are, I think, made plain in the text and, if once understood by an actor, would show him how to play the part.

The first thing to be noticed in the text is that Hamlet's behaviour, up to his interview with the Ghost, is quite normal. He is aghast, as anyone would be, at his mother's quick remarriage and troubled by doubts about foul play to his father; but, just before the Ghost appears, he is talking calmly about the evils of drunkenness. Further, his behaviour during the interview is also normal, considering the news the Ghost has to tell him. When the Ghost speaks of murder, he says, just what we should expect him to say—

Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge.

Those words are the natural prelude to a *tragedy of revenge*; *yet the tragedy that follows* is not one of revenge; and, as soon as the Ghost has gone, Shakespeare begins that other tragedy which he has designed and which is different from anything that could have been even conceived in the earlier play. For then it is that Hamlet's behaviour begins to be abnormal. He repeats the words—"Remember thee?" and insists on them as if he were already aware of some obstacle to remembrance—

Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there;
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmixed with baser matter: yes, by heaven!
O most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
My tables,—meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark.
So, uncle, there you are.—Now to my word;
It is "Adieu, adieu! remember me":
I have sworn't.

This, as the rest of the play proves, is not mere rhetoric; there is an obstacle to remembrance of which he speaks afterwards; and when he writes on his tables, he is already fighting with it.

It has been pointed out that "table of my memory" suggests to him his tables or note books; and a few lines on there is another suggestion of the same kind, the mere sameness of the words carrying his mind from one thought to another, where there is no other connexion between them. Horatio cries—"Illo, ho, ho, my lord!" and Hamlet answers—"Hillo, ho, ho, boy! come, bird, come"; that is to say, he answers a simple cry as if it

were the cry of a falconer to his birds. This being at the mercy of words and their chance suggestions is a symptom of mental disorder; and it is the first sign of that disorder in Hamlet. It may also be a sign of the struggle for coherence—his mind is in such confusion that he clutches at any clue to a meaning and so lets the accidents of language make his sense for him. All his strange behaviour with Horatio and Marcellus is of a piece with this. He speaks "wild and whirling words," in the hope that the words themselves will express a purpose or a sense which he cannot find in his thought. He is on the point of telling the others what the Ghost has told him and then flinches from it with the words—

> There's ne'er a villain dwelling in all Denmark—
> But he's an arrant knave—

Something prevents him from telling; but it is not policy, it is an obstacle within himself, a repulsion that he does not understand. And finally this obstacle becomes for the time his purpose; and he makes them swear with desperate particularity that they will be silent about the whole matter.

Every one to whom the scene is not staled by

use must feel the strangeness of it, especially Hamlet's joking with the Ghost; but the strangeness is equalled by the certainty with which it is conceived and executed. It is Shakespeare at the height of his power, setting himself a task of extreme difficulty and performing it as no one else could. But here, if he were influenced by the old play, we should expect to see clearly its influence and its crudity; for the pretended madness of Hamlet is part of the original story and we may assume with Mr. Robertson that it was pretended in the old play, as it is in the German version, to avert the suspicions of the King. Further, madness is very crudely treated in the Elizabethan drama, is often a joke or a mere spectacle, as even in *The Duchess of Malfi*; but here there is no trace of this crudeness or of the old motive except in the words—

> How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself,
> As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
> To put an antic disposition on—

which, as I have said, were probably put in to satisfy those who, remembering the old play, would expect the same pretence of madness in this one, or who might, at least, ask questions

about Hamlet's behaviour. Clearly Shakespeare has his own new purpose; and what is it?

That, I think, we may learn from the text. Hamlet is suffering a violent nervous shock from the Ghost's news, a shock which affects his behaviour throughout the play; and it is stressed in this scene as we should expect it to be, if of so much future importance. Therefore an actor should stress it in his acting; he should make us see the nervous shock revealing itself in Hamlet as soon as the Ghost leaves him. So, and only so, I think, can he make the scene intelligible. Hamlet must be "all to pieces" as his talk and his intentions are all to pieces.

But how does this nervous shock affect him during the rest of the play? It may be that we, with our greater psychological knowledge, can explain that which Shakespeare makes happen because he knows that it would happen, better than he could have explained it. Therefore I will venture to apply a psychological formula to Hamlet. No doubt an expert psychologist could put it better; but I must do the best I can, applying to it always this test—Could it be acted? or would it help a player to act the part?

The formula is this—That when Hamlet was implored by his father's ghost to avenge his murder, and in particular to put an end to the incestuous marriage between his mother and the murderer, his conscious resolve, made with all the force of his will, was to obey his father. But the shock which he suffered on hearing of the murder, and particularly on realizing the full horror of his mother's re-marriage, made, as it were, a wound in his mind, which hurt whenever he thought of the murder, or of his uncle, or of his mother's connexion with his uncle. The pain of the wound was so sharp that, unconsciously, he flinched from it and seized every pretext to forget it. He would will to remember it as he willed to take vengeance; but here "the law of reversed action" worked within him. The more he tried to force himself into action, the more his unconscious invented pretexts why he should delay to act. In fact, the play is made by Hamlet's irrelevance, not by his purpose of revenge. It is the essence of the tragedy that this irrelevance, the result not of any weakness in Hamlet's character but of nervous shock, causes many deaths where there

should be only one, and causes Hamlet to misexpress himself in action and in talk. The soliloquies are the great exception. They are far more numerous than in any other of Shakespeare's plays, and they are there to contrast the real with the misexpressed Hamlet and to keep the former in our minds. It is commonly assumed that they are an unnatural device, like arias in an opera; but there are some people who do soliloquize aloud, especially those who are disordered in their minds; and the style of Hamlet's soliloquies is that of a man talking to himself, differing, for the most part, sharply from the style of the more rhetorical passages in the play. An actor could mark this difference; he could lapse into spoken reverie, sometimes brooding, sometimes passionate; and Shakespeare, in one place at least, has insisted how deep this reverie is. For Hamlet is so lost in his first soliloquy—"O! that this too too solid flesh would melt"—that he does not recognize Horatio and then says with a start—"Horatio—or do I forget myself." At least this seems to me the natural dramatic meaning of the passage; though to Mr. Robertson it suggests

"long severance." In the soliloquies Hamlet is puzzled by his own behaviour and in them Shakespeare himself insists that that behaviour is abnormal. He must have a purpose in this, artistic and dramatic, not scientific; and that purpose is to represent the complete Hamlet, the Hamlet of his own thoughts as well as the Hamlet who is provoked to excess by people and things. Think of the play without the soliloquies, and you will see that the inner Hamlet is as much a part of the drama as the outer; without the inner, the outer would be the erratic puppet that Mr. Robertson and Mr. Eliot make him out to be.

Mr. Robertson and Mr. Eliot are right when they say that the play deals with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son, though Mr. Eliot is wrong when he says that that effect cannot be shown in the play. It is shown, whenever Shakespeare wishes to show it, though it is not the whole theme of the play. And no doubt, because the murder of his father is inextricably associated with his mother's guilt, it is repulsive to him, not merely as an act or in its consequences, but as a very subject of thought. That, and not his own wrongs, is

the reason why he hates his uncle so bitterly—and I have never seen an actor stress this hatred as much as it is stressed in the text. Hamlet has, as it were, a "phobia" of the very subject; merely to think of it brings a whole train of hideous, uncontrollable associations into his mind, from which he will escape by any unconscious device.

So much for the formula, which was unknown to Shakespeare and which, by itself, will not, of course, account for the effect of the play upon us. That is produced mainly by Hamlet's character; and the formula, I would insist, is not a part of his character but rather a mechanism to which it is subject and to which any other character might be subject. The effect of the play is produced by subjecting that particular character to that particular mechanism, though Shakespeare, of course, never put it so to himself. He saw Hamlet, with the certainty of intuition, behaving in a certain way. Perhaps, reading the old play, he said to himself—"But would a man need to pretend madness in such a case?" And then, perhaps, suddenly he saw the whole story in terms of reality; saw the man of whom that

story might best be told and saw it happening to him. In most great plays the story is old; the dramatist shows his genius in discovering the people of whom it ought to be told; and, when he has done this, the story becomes his own and he can make his own play of it. Then he does not illustrate the story with his characters; rather they make the story and make it new; and this is what happened with Hamlet. Whether he was drawn from some one whom Shakespeare knew,[1] or from himself, or from both, or whether he was conceived because he was the man for that story, we feel that it could be told about no one else. Take, for instance, the device of the play-scene, itself a pretext for escaping from the task of revenge — Is not Hamlet the only one of all Shakespeare's tragic characters to whom that device would be quite natural? You cannot imagine it occurring to Othello, or Coriolanus, or Macbeth, or Romeo. Or take the soliloquies —they must be uttered by a man in the

[1] I have the impression, which, I find, is shared by others, that Hamlet was drawn from a real man; but, as there is nothing to prove it, it will not interest a reader who does not share that impression.

habit of expressing himself to himself, a man with a gift for expression; and Hamlet has this beyond any other of Shakespeare's characters. He is the only one of them, as Mr. Bradley says, who seems, himself, a man of genius and who can put his conscious selt before himself with Shakespeare's own power. The fact that he cannot put his unconscious self before himself is the tragedy.

Further, for the fullness of the tragedy, there is needed an incompatibility between the revenge imposed on Hamlet and his own character. You can imagine Coriolanus performing that revenge, and probably killing his mother into the bargain, without hesitation. But it is not merely pity or gentleness, still less irresolution, that makes the task distasteful to Hamlet. He has too rich a nature to be narrowed into a vendetta; he is interested in everything, capable of enjoying everything. Ophelia describes the normal Hamlet when she says—

Oh, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword;
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form——

And this richness is always rebelling against the narrow passion of revenge imposed upon it, and hating the King all the more because of the alien and importunate hatred that he inspires; it rebels against the impoverishment, the obsession, caused by the nervous shock. Hamlet would be doing so many things; and he is forced to be thinking of only one thing and that a thing contrary to his own nature. The tragedy would be far less if Othello were the hero of it; just as, if Hamlet had been Desdemona's husband, that tragedy would never have happened.

Nor would the tragedy of Hamlet have happened if he had been merely an amiable character of weak will; it does happen because the machinery of a strong will is disordered; and it is the contrast between the will and its disordered machinery which makes both the interest and the pity of the play. Hamlet would be a dazzling character in a comedy; but in his own play he has the beauty and pathos of a sick child as well; he is more fully revealed than he could be otherwise; he is in fact the man for the part.

All this is beyond the formula; yet the

formula may help us to see it; it may discover for us the underlying logic of certain scenes which might otherwise seem exhibitions of mere comic caprice, and which often are so acted. There is, for instance, Hamlet's behaviour to Polonius, half comic, half pathetic. With Polonius he does put on an antic disposition, which is provoked by the fact that Polonius assumes him to be mad. In the first interview (Act II. Scene II.) Polonius says to him—"Do you know me, my lord?" and Hamlet plays up to the question by answering—"Excellent well; you are a fishmonger." We must all have wished we could enjoy the licence of madness when pestered by some eminent bore, and Charles Lamb took that licence; his behaviour to the man who asked Wordsworth whether he did not think Milton a great poet was like the behaviour of Hamlet to Polonius. "I must feel that gentleman's bumps," he cried, and had to be removed to Haydon's studio. But Polonius, besides being a bore incapable of understanding Hamlet, sane or mad, is a further source of disturbance to him in that he is Ophelia's father. Ophelia attracts and repels him for reasons which I

will try to give when I come to the scene between her and Hamlet; she is closely, though accidentally, associated with his main trouble; and Polonius is incongruously associated with her. Thus Hamlet does harp on Ophelia to Polonius, as Polonius remarks, though not for the simple reason that he is in love with her. In the interview with Polonius Shakespeare proves how closely he has observed melancholy, in himself or in others. Hamlet is fighting his melancholy while he trifles with Polonius; but twice he slips back into it with the irrelevant, sighed, or groaned, exclamations of a melancholiac. When Polonius asks him fussily—"Will you walk out of the air, my lord?" he answers—"Into my grave?" And when Polonius says—"I will most humbly take my leave of you," he replies—"You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal; except my life, except my life, except my life." The repetition here is a symptom of mechanical falling back into a persistent state of melancholy.

And then follows the scene with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a scene such as no dramatist

had ever written before and none has ever equalled since; for it is the dramatization of a disordered state of mind, the exhibition of it, not in analysis or soliloquy, but in dialogue never forced and remaining relevant to the play. This scene, to be acted intelligibly, must be understood; and the psychological formula will, I think, help us to understand every turn of it.

Remember that Hamlet, unconsciously, is seeking every pretext to escape from the thought of the murder and his mother's unfaithfulness, and that everything associated with these subjects is painful to him; everything connected with the court, for instance, for the court centres in the King and Queen. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are free from these associations, for they have only just returned to the court; and he welcomes them as a diversion from Polonius, one of "these tedious old fools" who belong to the wearisome and horrible world of the court. What Hamlet desires in his trouble is disinterested friends, like Horatio, not tainted by dull and wicked worldliness—friends who will seem to belong to his own happy, unwounded past

He takes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to be such—"My excellent good friends! How dost thou, Guildenstern?—Ah, Rosencrantz? Good lads, how do ye both?" and in this warmth we can see him insisting to himself that they are what he would have them be, good lads, belonging to the past of friendship and freedom. But they do not answer in his mood—the contrast could, and should, be marked in the acting—there is all the disguised caution of the court in their reply—

R. As the indifferent children of the earth.
G. Happy in that we are not over-happy;
On Fortune's cap we are not the very button.

And instantly Hamlet is on his guard too. "Nor the soles of her shoe?" he says, and then makes a dirty joke, as being the kind of conversation fit for courtiers. They continue the joke and so fall more and more into the "complex" of the court for him; and the suspicion grows in him that they have come with an object. What he longs for is friends without an object. "Let me question you more in particular," he says "What have you, my good friends, deserved

at the hands of Fortune, that she sends you to prison hither?"

Prison means for him the prison of his own mind, the complex into which they now are drawn. It is not a prison to them, they say; and he remarks how he is divided from them by his state of mind—"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so; to me it is a prison." And then Rosencrantz, cunningly but insensitively, begins to probe him, suggesting that ambition makes Denmark a prison to him. Hamlet sees that the misunderstanding is complete—that anyone should suspect him of ambition of all things! "O God, I could be bounded in a nut-shell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have had dreams."[1] Then, in his weariness, he is drawn into a passage of aimless wit which he ends by saying—"Shall we to the court? for, by my fay, I cannot reason." The court and court-formulæ are the only things for them. They say together eagerly yet obsequiously, like two designing court-puppets, "We'll wait upon you"; and again

[1] It seems to me that the emendation here of *had* for *bad* is proved right by the context.

Hamlet tries to turn them into friends—"No such matter; I will not sort you with the rest of my servants; for, to speak to you like an honest man, I am most dreadfully attended." Then suspicion possesses him again, and he asks—"But, in the beaten way of friendship, what make you at Elsinore?" They lie and he knows they lie—"To visit you, my lord; no other occasion"; and then his suspicion bursts out, still in conflict with his desire for friendship. "Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation? Come, deal justly with me; come, come; nay, speak." They can say anything but to the purpose, the purpose being that they shall convince him of their friendship. And then he puts his suspicion to them directly—"I know the good King and Queen have sent for you." Still they fence with him—"To what end, my lord?" And again he makes a yet wilder appeal that they shall be Horatios to him. "By the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserved love, and by what more dear a better proposer could charge you withal, be even and direct with me, whether you

were sent for, or no." They whisper fatally together, but then have the wit to confess they were sent for; and Hamlet, melted by this one piece of honesty, like a neurasthenic cannot forbear from telling them about the state of his own mind; only few neurasthenics can describe themselves so. He tells how his distaste, caused, though he does not know it, by the crime of the King and Queen, has spread to everything; and at the same time he shows us what a love of life that distaste has infected and perverted. Then, at the end, there is a sudden return of suspicion—"Man delights not me, no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so."

Then come the players, another diversion. They are outside the complex, but they are drawn into it; for they suggest to him a pretext by which he shall yet again put off his revenge, while seeming to advance it. In the soliloquy—"Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!"—he begins by contrasting the player's emotion over an imaginary sorrow with his own failure even to feel what he should, with his strange and persistent irrelevance. So he incites his conscious desire

for revenge; but, out of that very incitement, comes another pretext for delay suggested by his unconscious; the spirit he has seen may be the devil and may have deceived him; he must have a proof of the King's guilt and the play will give it to him.

Now I do not say that all this can be acted; but I believe that, by means of it, an actor could give meaning and consistency to the part of Hamlet. If Hamlet is merely comic in his scenes with Polonius, merely rhetorical in his soliloquies or in his account of his melancholy to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, then it is but a part "with a lot of fat" in it; and one might indeed believe that Shakespeare had taken an old and crude play, kept its essential crudity, but made a fine talkative Hamlet for Burbage to display himself in. The play, as often acted, is like a concerto composed for a virtuoso pianist, with no logic of construction but plenty of showy passages for the piano. Many actors, famous in their day, have played it so; but, though there is Elizabethan rhetoric in it, if Hamlet plays his part rhetorically, he makes nonsense of it. He himself gives warning on this point, in his

advice to the players, which should be applied to his own part. "There be players that I have seen play and heard others praise . . . that have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably." If you are to imitate humanity well, you must have something to imitate, just as if you are to play music well you must have real music to play. The scene with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is not merely words to be bellowed, nor is it merely character to be displayed; it is character subject to a particular psychological state which governs all its changes of mood; and it is in this counterpoint of character and psychological state that the main interest of the play lies. It would be possible, as it is necessary, to act Hamlet's eagerness of welcome to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and their easy yet mechanical response to it; to show his instant change of mood, falling in with theirs, his growing suspicion heightened by their hint about ambition, and then his sudden return to his first eagerness, now become desperate because

it is sure of disappointment; and then again the intensity with which he describes his melancholy and tries to make them understand, what he cannot, why his distaste has spread to all the things he loves most, while for the moment he loses it in the very description of all that he has ceased to care for. It would be possible to act all this, but only if the actor saw the meaning of it all; and the easiest way to this meaning, now, is by psychology.

It is to be noted that Hamlet welcomes the players as eagerly as he had welcomed Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—"You are welcome, masters; welcome all. I am glad to see thee well; welcome, good friends. O, my old friend! Why thy face is valanced, since I saw thee last; comest thou to beard me in Denmark?—What, my young lady and mistress! By'r lady, your ladyship is nearer to heaven than when I saw you last by the altitude of a chopine. . . ." They at least have nothing to do with the court and they bring his free past back to him. Happy for the moment in this freedom, so that he may keep it, he cries—"We'll have a speech straight; come, give us

a taste of your quality; come, a passionate speech."

As important as the scene with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is the scene with Ophelia; and, unless an actor understands this, and acts his understanding, he will make it merely mad and repulsive. The prelude to this scene is "To be or not to be," in which Hamlet is brooding more aimlessly than ever. Already he has lost the eagerness which the device of the play-scene had given him for a moment; he has forgotten all about his father's Ghost, and seems to be so far in unconscious doubt about it that he speaks of the "undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns." This may be Shakespeare's inadvertence but it is more likely Hamlet's oblivion. He is just speaking in general terms of how the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, being so deep in his own state that he presents it to himself as universal, when he sees Ophelia. For the moment his past again rushes back to him, and he addresses her like a rapturous yet courtly lover—

Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remembered—

addresses her in fact as he had addressed her in the letter which Polonius reads to the King and Queen. Until the interview with the Ghost, he had been quite simply and without misgiving in love with her. It is the interview with the Ghost which changes his behaviour towards her, for reasons which I will now give.

Ophelia, while she recalls the past to him, is also horribly connected with the present. She is a woman like his mother, and also a woman of the court; and in the past he had loved her as he loved his mother. If we would explain the shock which his mother's adultery had given him in psychological terms, we may say that, having thought of her entirely as a mother, he found something vilely incongruous in her renewing of her sexual youth with his uncle, especially as his uncle had become physically loathsome to him. He can no longer think of her as his mother; she has become something else to him; and his mind is made sick and dizzy by the change of associations.

Further, it is a fact that men of delicate spirit expect and find something maternal in the women they fall in love with. The phrase

"Œdipus complex" is now used to describe this association; but it suggests something unnatural and unhealthy, whereas the association itself is not only natural and healthy but an element in all love that is not mere desire. Men get an idea of woman from their mothers, and fall in love with women in whom they recognize the same idea. They are truly in love with an incarnation of the divine and universal woman. But, if a man's idea of his mother were suddenly destroyed, as Hamlet's was, by her adultery, the association between her and the woman he loved would be likely to infect his love with his disgust for his mother. So Hamlet, having seen his mother in Ophelia, still sees her, horribly changed, in Ophelia; and his anger with his mother involves her.

You may think this too fanciful; but the text bears it out and there is no other explanation of his sudden change of manner to Ophelia. She herself incites it by her provocative remark—

How does your honour for this many a day?—

implying that lately she has seen less of him than before; and still more by returning her

presents, which no doubt, he imputes to her father's orders. "I never gave you aught," he says, meaning that he revokes his past love and all dealings between them. And then suspicion breaks into words, as with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. "Are you fair? Are you honest?" But, in the midst of his cruel banter he remembers—"I did love you once"; and then follows a proof how much his mother is in his mind. "You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not." He must be as faithless as his mother, he means; she had seemed to love his father. But, if he is doomed to be faithless, Ophelia had better have nothing to do with men. So he tells her to go to a nunnery. For the moment he has transferred the conviction of sexual sin from her to himself, because he is the son of his mother—"I could accuse myself of such things, that it were better my mother had not borne me." And then gradually he falls more and more into a rage with Ophelia because he loves her still and because she is so meek. But his rage against her is his rage against his mother, whom he also loves, and he

expresses it in abuse of all women of the court, who cannot be themselves, who must paint and amble and jig and lisp and talk hidden obscenities. All that he says is the very opposite of the truth about Ophelia, but that is why he says it. As with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he grows more and more desperately serious, as if hoping that she will be provoked into some reassuring defiance. But that is beyond her, which is her tragedy, and the tragedy of Hamlet's loneliness. His mother has failed him and Ophelia seems to fail him too; they are both of the court, of this world of murder and adultery and complying insincerity; even the woman he loves is of it; and all the while she is simply bewildered and frightened.

So in the next scene, after his advice to the players, he turns passionately to Horatio as one who is not of the court nor yet passion's slave like himself. All his affection, which has recoiled baffled from Ophelia, tries now to satisfy itself with Horatio; and it is again part of the tragedy that Horatio, with all his virtues, is not understanding. Shakespeare has conceived him for his part in the tragedy

as surely as Hamlet himself. We may find no fault in him; but in Hamlet's affection for him and his temperate response to it, as if he were a kind of George Washington, we feel Hamlet's loneliness still more keenly.

The scene with Ophelia is merely painful and unintelligible unless the actor can show that Hamlet is misexpressing himself under a compulsion he does not understand. He must act his nervous instability and express it in every change of mood; or Hamlet will be only a brutal buffoon.

In the play-scene Ophelia attracts and repels him to further outrage all the more outrageous because it is before the whole court. If his obscenities are left out, as they usually are, the edge of the tragedy is blunted. Hamlet treats Ophelia before the court as one of the court, and the court should laugh at his dirty jokes. Ophelia herself hardly resents them; she is trying to do her duty by every one and she does not know what her duty to Hamlet may be.

Through the play-scene his excitement and his spirits rise continually. It seems to him that he is really doing something at last, when

the players are doing it. Then, when the King has fled proving his guilt, he springs triumphant on to the stage and shouts his irrelevant verses; but instantly the tide begins to turn and he says ironically—"Would not this get me a fellowship in a cry of players?" He sees that what has been done is but play-acting; the King has been frighted, but with false fire.

Then in the following scene with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Hamlet has forgotten the play and his task and everything practical in a dramatic performance of his own with the recorders. He is here at the height of his powers, as if he were Shakespeare himself presented on the stage; but his triumph is one of art not of fact. His unconscious has turned him from the ugly world of fact into this other world of art where he can forget it for the moment.

It would be mere ingenuity, I think, to explain Hamlet's refusal to kill the King at his prayers as yet another trick of his unconscious finding any pretext to turn him from his task. In this case the explanation could not be acted and so would, I believe, be wrong. It may be that, in fact, a man such as Hamlet would find a pretext for refusing to kill his

enemy in such a case; but the text here gives no hint of it. The explanation both of Hamlet's refusal and of Shakespeare's intention, is, I think, much simpler. What Hamlet really expresses in the scene is his extreme hatred of the King, upon which the text insists again and again. It is a physical as well as moral loathing, caused no doubt by the thought of the King's adultery with his mother. Here, above all, we have to rid our minds of the notion of a gentle, dreaming Hamlet. Hamlet does really wish to catch the King "in the incestuous pleasure of his bed"; he does wish to enjoy the pleasure of killing him; and he must be in a rage to do that, which he cannot be while the King is meekly kneeling upon his knees. The only way Hamlet can bring himself to think of revenge at all, associated as it is with the thought of his father's murder and his mother's adultery, is by working himself up into a rage with the murderer and adulterer. In this scene we should see him trying to do that and failing while the King prays before him.

This, I think, could be acted, so as to make even the theological scruple seem natural to us; but it is, for a modern audience, the most

difficult scene in the play because the feelings of Hamlet would not now express themselves in a theological formula. It is probable that Shakespeare kept that formula from the older play, since it is in the German version; but he has used it for his own purposes and adjusted it to the character of his Hamlet.

The first point to be noted about the scene between Hamlet and his mother is that almost throughout he behaves normally. Even the sudden stabbing of Polonius through the arras is what we should expect from the scene before. Hamlet would not kill the King praying but he is ready enough to kill him eavesdropping; indeed he could not find a better way of killing a man whom he loathed so much that he did not care to touch him even with a sword, than to stab him through a curtain. The words—"How now! a rat? dead, for a ducat, dead!" express the feeling with which he would wish to kill the King—as if he were vermin and, like vermin, skulking behind hangings. It is not natural to Hamlet to kill men, nor can he take any primitive pleasure in it; and this scene refutes once and for all the notion of some critics that he wished to make of his

revenge a solemn act of justice. What he does wish is to get the King out of the way and then forget about him; and this wish is so strong that he is ready to kill him even in his mother's presence.

The scene begins a little theatrically as if Shakespeare had not, at this moment, a very firm grasp of Hamlet's behaviour—Hamlet is best revealed either in intimate talk or in that fantastic behaviour which expresses a thwarted desire for intimacy. To his mother he cannot be either intimate or fantastic. So Shakespeare falls back upon the splendid rhetoric which is his usual resource when at a loss. He insists upon Hamlet's physical loathing of the King and upon his horror of his mother's adultery directly and in language which is not peculiarly Hamlet's. Some of this scene seems written to make things clear to the stupider part of his audience.

It is curious that the Ghost should appear saying—

> Do not forget: this visitation
> Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose—

when Hamlet has just killed Polonius in mistake for the King. We may find ingenious explana-

tions of this inconsistency; but here I suspect a survival from the old play. Shakespeare would consent to it because we do not notice the inconsistency when we see the scene acted, and because the Ghost's appearance, at this point, and in the presence of Gertrude though unseen by her, is most effective theatrically. Further, it has the dramatic effect of changing Hamlet's mood to his mother; for the Ghost says—

> But look, amazement on thy mother sits;
> Oh, step between her and her fighting soul.
> Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works;
> Speak to her, Hamlet.

And from this point Hamlet's manner to her is both kinder and more intimate. He is himself, and not merely a splendid speech-maker, in the passage—"My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time"; though he goes off into bitterness again when he thinks of her sharing the King's bed.

Hamlet here insists upon his sanity in a manner which proves that Shakespeare wished to insist upon it; and his sanity here is what we should expect, because, though he is face to face with the subject of his horror, he is able

to express that horror to one of the persons who have caused it. This talking to his mother, like the play-scene, is for him an action which for the moment sets his spirit free. Instead of killing the King, he can talk about the King to her, a much more natural way, for him, of venting his hate. Those critics who reproach him for preferring words to acts forgot that it is a mark of civilization, not of weak will, to prefer words to acts of violence. Hamlet's desire is to change the mind of his mother; and he would, no doubt, if he thought it possible, try to change the mind of the King. What infuriates men like Hamlet in men like the King is the fact that their minds cannot be changed; that is why they seem to be vermin, but killing is no remedy for the fact that vermin in human shape exist.

Hamlet's behaviour to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and to the King, when questioned about Polonius, is an echo of his behaviour after his first interview with the Ghost and, like that, a reaction after nervous shock. It would be repulsive, if an actor playing it did not show the symptoms of nervous shock. But

the moment the King tells him he is to go to England, the symptoms disappear. It is a practical diversion; something to be done and experienced which takes him away from his horror. His last words are—

> Father and mother is man and wife: man and wife is one flesh; and so, my mother. Come, for England!

It is because the King and his mother are one flesh that he would rather escape from them than take revenge; killing is no remedy for that.

And then follows the scene in which Hamlet hears of the expedition of Fortinbras to Poland and contrasts the activity of Fortinbras with his own inaction. In this soliloquy his bewilderment at the processes of his own mind is clearly expressed. Nowhere else is there such rambling of thought, as if the conscious were feeling about for a cause which remains in the unconscious; or such argument about himself, as if that self were something not himself which he can observe but not control. Here he insists that there are no external obstacles to his revenge—

> Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means,
> To do't——

And here he speaks of bestial oblivion, really the shrinking of his unconscious from the very subject of revenge, which expresses itself, to the conscious, in forgetfulness. Talking of Fortinbras, he tries to feel like Fortinbras, to dramatize himself as Fortinbras—

> Rightly to be great
> Is not to stir without great argument,
> But greatly to find quarrel in a straw,
> When honour's at the stake.

That is the more primitive kind of man that Hamlet, for the moment, would be, just as he had wished to be Horatio. But he cannot be either. He hates but with a hatred that cannot be satisfied with any act of revenge, since it is really not so much hatred even of the King as of a beastliness in life itself which the King represents for him. That is what is meant when Hamlet is called a philosopher. It is not that he is incapable of action but that action cannot satisfy a mind shocked by life itself. If he kills the King, he will not kill that beastliness, which, since the King and Queen first convinced him of it, have infected the whole of his world so that Denmark is to him a prison. It is like shell-shock, which

establishes such a tyranny over the mind that little noises shock it like the shell. So Hamlet scents lust even in Ophelia, and the King's cold, murderous policy in all the courtiers. Not one of them will ever say the thing he means, for their meaning is always furtive and evil; and so he does not feel much regret over killing Polonius, who was eavesdropping like a courtier.

> The time is out of joint:—O cursed spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right!

That was his conclusion after he had heard of the murder of his father. All things, not merely the King and Queen, are wrong; so he will hail any chance of escaping from this world where beastliness reigns; he is like a neurasthenic who thinks that change of place will mean change of mind.

Hamlet's absence is convenient to the actor who plays the part, for it gives him a rest which he must need. It also gives the audience a relaxation from the exacting task of following all his subtleties; and, in the fifth act, he returns with all the more effect. This is enough, I think, to explain why Shakespeare

dispatched him, making use, no doubt, of a crude device in the old play. Its crudity does not matter since it is not inconsistent with Hamlet's character, but rather natural to his mood, that he should seize any pretext for escaping. And then reappearing in the Grave-digger's scene he is drawn artfully and gradually into the action of the play. He does not return hot for revenge, but will talk of anything and particularly of the manners of courtiers—"This might be my Lord Such-an-one that praised my Lord Such-an-one's horse, when he meant to beg it, might it not?"

At the beginning of this scene Hamlet seems dazed and aimless, ready to talk of the aimless indignity of death—"How long will a man lie i' the earth ere he will rot?" He comes back for a moment to himself in his memories of Yorick; but then talks of dissolution like Donne himself; one might indeed suspect that Donne remembered him in at least one famous passage of his sermons. But he is brought into the action again with Ophelia's funeral and with his own words—

But soft, but soft! aside: here comes the King.

Nowhere does he behave so outrageously as when he leaps into the grave where Laertes is, mouthing grief and vengeance together. It is like Hamlet, as Mr. Bradley has remarked, to be thus æsthetically provoked by the manner in which Laertes exploits the situation. Adopting the same manner, dramatizing himself as Laertes, as before he had dramatized himself as Fortinbras, he cries—

> This is I,
> Hamlet, the Dane.

Nothing can be more theatrically effective—for those who see Hamlet as melodrama; but it is also satire on the natural staginess of people like Laertes, and satire natural to Hamlet. His impatience with Laertes is an echo of his impatience with the player. "Begin murderer; pox, leave thy damnable faces, and begin." He does not believe in love that can express itself thus; and, seeing Ophelia's grave, he is aware that he loved her, though he cannot express his love with Laertes ranting there before the King—

> I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers
> Could not, with all their quantity of love,
> Make up my sum—What wilt thou do for her?

Then follows a series of protestations with the sudden ending

> Nay, and thou'lt mouth,
> I'll rant as well as thou.

It is part of his trouble that he cannot express any of his most real feelings directly ; when he would say that he loved Ophelia, he must parody her brother. He regrets it afterwards ; but even then he adds—

> But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me
> Into a towering passion.

The last of Hamlet's antic disposition is seen in his dialogue with Osric, again an echo of the scenes with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ; for Osric, with his airs and graces, also makes him think of the court and sets him jangling out of tune. He parodies Osric to his face as he parodied Laertes ; and he enjoys doing it, for again it is art which diverts him from reality. There is nothing Hamlet hates more than fashion for its own sake ; and those who tell us that Shakespeare was a snob in his ridicule of the mob forgot that there is far more bitterness in his ridicule of courtiers. He has the artist's dislike for all kinds of unreality, whether it be a crowd shouting at the word of command

or a courtier talking court-jargon. The little scene between Hamlet and Horatio before the fencing has in it the last touch of his melancholy with the sudden change to a sigh—"I shall win at the odds. But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter."

And then follows the sense of destiny to be fulfilled at last—"If it be now, 'tis not to come: if it be not to come, it will be now: if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all; since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is it to leave betimes? Let be."

Asking pardon of Laertes, he is for the first time, before the court, an accomplished gentleman. He even pleads his own madness, or distraction; and here, if this change be well acted, we cannot but feel the end approaching. Laertes, like the young pedant that he is, says he must bring his cause before a court of honour; and Hamlet plays up to his gallantries with compliments that still seem to have a hint of irony in them—

> I'll be your foil, Laertes; in mine ignorance
> Your skill shall, like a star i' the darkest night,
> Stick fiery off indeed.

It is a politeness almost Chinese; and, another

ominous sign, he is now ceremoniously polite to the King also. Then the end comes with a rush; and, even when the King and Hamlet are both dying, he remembers the King's worst offence, his adultery with the Queen—

> Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane,
> Drink off this potion! Is thy union here?
> Follow my mother.

Then, the King being dead, he thinks no more of him. Dying himself, his last desire is that Horatio shall set him right with the world. The play ends with this desire unfulfilled; and the entry of Fortinbras tells that it is over and that life remains for good, commonplace people, such as Horatio, who certainly cannot explain Hamlet. Restoration of nature

The end is sudden; but the reader must remember that it was written to be acted, and that actors can lay an emphasis which will give weight to a scene that seems too swift and light when read. The nature of the plot is such that the end could not be prepared or foreseen long beforehand. It must come of events which force Hamlet to act on the spur of the moment. The play is bitter tragedy throughout, perhaps the bitterest of all tragedies, but

it is not gloomy, because of the brilliance and diversity of Hamlet's mind, because he is always his own Mercutio. He flashes and dances through a hideous world which heightens his beauty by contrast; and that beauty is the theme and the justification of the play.

CHAPTER III

On "Hamlet" as an Æsthetic Document

THE reader is now, I hope, convinced that *Hamlet* is a good play, if he needed convincing; but I have not written at this length only to convince him. I have wished to deal with two kinds of criticism which seem to me perverse though common; and to examine *Hamlet* in detail as being an important document for all who would understand the nature, not only of dramatic art, but of all art. When Mr. Robertson says that *Hamlet* is to be understood only in terms of some earlier play, I would answer—"Then it cannot be worth understanding"; and Mr. Eliot implies that it is not worth understanding, when he says that it is most certainly an artistic failure. To him I am provoked to reply—"But it is one of the documents from which we may learn what artistic success is."

To deny that is to ignore the facts of art for a theory which will land you at last on some desert absurdity—as that *Coriolanus* is a better play than *Hamlet*.

Such criticism, especially if practised with an intimidating manner, sets up obstructions to the experience of works of art, which it is one of the main functions of criticism to remove. We are all subject to wrong suggestions about works of art as about other things; and the critic helps us if he can rid our minds of them so that we may experience works of art simply. There are, for instance the suggestions likely to affect the ordinary man, which are usually wrong expectations. He expects all works of art to be like those to which he is accustomed; he expects to be amused at once, and without any effort on his part, by every work of art; and, if he is not he decides that it is not for him. But there are also other, less crude and less obviously wrong, suggestions. For instance, the suggestions of learning, that a work of art is to be studied mainly as a historical documen or as a link in some process of evolution; or else, if it be a tragedy, that we must examine

it to see how far it conforms to the principles laid down by Aristotle in his *Poetics* or by any other critic in whom we trust. And, finally, there are the suggestions of fastidiousness, which come of our anxiety not to like anything we ought not to like, or of a mechanical reaction against what is commonly said. All of these are obstructions; and criticism should set us on our guard against them.

Aristotle's *Poetics* were long an obstruction to the experience of dramatic art, often because they were misunderstood, and often because it was forgotten that Aristotle had but a short and limited experience of that art. When we read *The Poetics*, we should remember that he wrote them without knowing *Hamlet*, and that, if he had known it, he might have written them differently; for he was a great man who would rather learn from facts than deny them. *Hamlet* is an important æsthetic document because its method is not one known to Aristotle, because it is something added by Shakespeare to the resources of his art. The law of art is all case-law, and *Hamlet* is a case that has been decided in the court of experience.

If Aristotle had read the plot of *Hamlet* in a bald outline he might well have condemned it; whereas, if he had read the plot of *Coriolanus*, he might have thought it all that a dramatist could wish for. But, in fact, plots in a bald outline are nothing; and criticism based on an examination and classification of them is nothing. Aristotle says that plot is the soul of tragedy, which should imply that the soul cannot be separated from the body; the plot cannot be related in other words, for, if it is, it is no longer the plot. But even Aristotle seems near to error when he says that plot is the principal part of tragedy, and character the part next in rank; for the better a tragedy, is the less possible is it to separate character from plot. What is done is done by particular persons, and what happens happens to them; it would be all different and perhaps absurd if the characters were different. If we can make a distinction between plot and character, the play falls short of complete success. We can make that distinction, to some extent, in *Coriolanus*; we can consider the plot apart from the characters without feeling that we are doing

something very foolish; but in *Hamlet* we cannot. The plot of that play is what it is because Hamlet is what he is; apart from him, there is no meaning or coherence in it, and it does seem a plot for Kyd rather than for Shakespeare.

Aristotle, again, says that a plot is not one merely because the hero is one. Numberless events happen to any man, many of which cannot be connected into one event; and there are many actions of one man which cannot be connected into a single action. So the poet should choose for his plot only those events which can be connected into one event and those actions which can be connected into one action. To this we must agree; there must be some kind of unity in a plot; but what is the nature of the connexion in *Hamlet* which gives unity to the plot? That we must seek in *Hamlet* and not in Aristotle; for it is, I think, a connexion which Aristotle had not experienced in any Greek play, and which therefore he has not mentioned. Yet it does give unity to the plot, and a unity perhaps more complete than is to be found in any other play whatever.

Shakespeare's "Hamlet"

Even Mr. Eliot says that in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* there is an "unmistakable tone" which is "unmistakably not in the earlier play." About the earlier play I, like Mr. Eliot, know nothing; but I agree that the peculiarity of *Hamlet* is in its tone, though not that the tone can be separated from the action. Rather I insist that the action is unified by the tone, which all comes from Hamlet himself. The peculiarity of the play consists, first, in this, that its unity is given to it by the predominance of a single character, a predominance so great that we see all the other characters only in relation to Hamlet and as contrasts to him at one point or another. Now you may say, if you please, that this ought not to be done; only Shakespeare has done it. And he has done another thing, still more surprising, which seems contrary to the principles of Aristotle. It is not only the character of Hamlet that makes the unity of the play; but it is also a particular, and morbid, state of that character; for without the shock suffered by Hamlet, and the consequent disorder of his mind, the plot would lack all reason and coherence.

Aristotle lays it down that the hero of a tragedy should be involved in misfortune, not through his deliberate vice or villainy, but through some error of human frailty. The word ἁμαρτία used here by Aristotle has been explained as meaning either a fault through avoidable or excusable ignorance, or one incurred through passion but without evil will. In fact Aristotle holds that in Tragedy there should be some justification of the ways of God to man, or of the order of things. If misfortunes happen, they should happen through the hero's own fault, which, yet, should not be so great as to deprive him of our sympathy. But Hamlet's misfortune does not happen to him either through avoidable ignorance or through passion. It happens, in the first place, because of crimes in which he is not implicated at all, and, in the second, through the nervous shock which he suffers on hearing of those crimes, and which is great, not because of the weakness, but because of the beauty of his nature. We should think poorly of a man who did not suffer so in such a case. In fact the key to this tragedy is to be

found in the words of Ophelia, not of Aristotle—

> Now see that noble and most sovereign reason
> Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh.

It is something which happens to Hamlet, not something done by him, that causes all the disaster; though, as Mr. Robertson says, critics, no doubt remembering Aristotle or governed by his desire to justify the ways of God to man, have often preached to Hamlet, like his comforters to Job.

Again, we may say that a tragedy ought not to be made out of the undeserved suffering of the hero, or, in particular, out of his mental disorder; only, again, Shakespeare has done it. We might expect that a tragedy so made would be merely disagreeable; Mr. Eliot seems to think it is. "Shakespeare," he says, "attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible," and failed. He implies, in fact, that the tragedy lacks beauty, when beauty is its most signal and most surprising quality. That is why *Hamlet* is an important æsthetic document. Beauty is achieved where we should not expect it to be achieved; and how?

I cannot attempt to answer this question without also attempting a statement of first principles, for which I ask the reader's patience.

All art is an expression of values; but the expression of values does not mean the statement of them. I may say what I value and leave every one cold; but values are expressed when they are communicated—that is to say, when the artist, by means of his work of art, causes his audience to share them. Unless this happens, unless the values are communicated, they are not expressed for the audience. The artist, however, has no practical purpose in the communication of his values; he does not attempt it either because he wishes to make his audience better men or because he hopes to get anything by it. Rather the desire to express, to communicate, is itself a part of that kind of experience which we call valuing; *the experience itself is not complete without expression.* Further, valuing is not merely moral, as we know in the case of love. It is an experience, always emotional and recognized by the emotion which accompanies it, an experience of which the immediate issue is simply the impulse to expression and

communication. Art, in fact, is the practical result of it; whenever we have the emotion of value, we are, potentially, artists. But the emotion, if it cannot find expression, is incomplete and baulked; if it produces only a direct statement of values, it has not expressed or communicated itself. Indeed, art cannot be a mere statement of values; the artist gives us something that is not an opinion, in which we see no opinion at all; he can express his values only in some *object*, which, without our knowing it, makes us value what he values; and this object he produces without making a statement of his values even to himself.

Thus, in music there can be no statement of values, for it is incapable of making any statement whatever; and the musician himself would be unable to say in words what values he had expressed in his music. Music is the object in which he expresses and communicates them; and our sense of the beauty of music is our sense of those values. And so it is with all the arts; when we are aware of beauty in them, then the artist has communicated his values to us; and, the more successful the process of communication, the less are we

aware of it. We do not say—"I value this or that"—but only—"This is beautiful." We are, however, aware of differences in the quality of beauty; and these correspond to differences in the quality of the values communicated. Beauty seems to us profound, and is most permanent in its effects upon us, when the artist has communicated to us his deepest and most permanent values, those which he has acquired through his most intense and complete experience. So, the quality of a man's art, given that he is an artist at all, depends upon his experiencing power. There are real artists, who give us a real, though slight, beauty, because their experiencing power is slight and their values, quick perhaps and vivid, are for little things. We are aware of this difference, as a difference in the quality of beauty, very clearly in music. For instance, the melodies of Sullivan are real melodies; but their beauty, which is also real, expresses a slighter experience and less permanent values than the melodies of Mozart. And intellect comes into art because it comes into all experience and so into all values. The artist with a profound intelligence sets himself a

harder problem, because his experience and his values are more profound; and he uses his intellect also in the solution of that problem. He has a larger content to express; and the object in which he expresses it is therefore more complex and more highly organized.

Let us now apply these principles to drama. Drama, of course, is capable of a direct statement of values; but such a statement will not make a drama any more than it will make a piece of music or a picture. Drama, like music or pictures, is the object in which values are communicated, and any statement of values is irrelevant to it, unless that statement is what a person of the drama would naturally say in the circumstances; in which case it is there, not as a statement of values, but as a part of the drama. Hamlet does, now and again, make a statement of his values which may be also Shakespeare's; but, in so far as it is relevant to the drama, it is there, not as a statement of Shakespeare's values, but as what Hamlet would say in those circumstances. Hamlet is not Shakespeare's mouthpiece; he is rather an embodiment of what Shakespeare values; and the play is a success because

Shakespeare, by the manner in which he presents Hamlet to us, makes us share his feelings for Hamlet. I speak in this case of Hamlet, the man, rather than of *Hamlet*, the play, because Hamlet, the man, is *Hamlet*, the play. Shakespeare seems in Hamlet, the man, to embody all that he himself most values in humanity. What he expresses is a very personal and individual value; and he does it through a very individual character. This does not mean, of course, that Shakespeare is preaching a sermon, that he is saying to us—"Here is my ideal man; let him also be yours." The artist, like the lover, has no propagandist purpose; but the mere fact that he values a certain kind of human being intensely causes him to express that value. And we see the intensity of Shakespeare's value for one kind of human being in the peculiar construction of *Hamlet*; it is what has caused him to make one character so predominant in it, to make the play itself, not a conflict of persons, but a conflict within the mind of Hamlet. The King and all the other persons of the play are almost passive spectators of the drama of Hamlet's mind, which they cannot understand.

What they do has dramatic value because of its effect on that drama rather than on the plot of the play. For instance, when the King tells Hamlet that he is to go to England, the interest lies in the manner in which Hamlet accepts the news, not in the news itself. In fact, all the other characters are seen through his eyes, in terms of his feelings. But the play succeeds because Hamlet is so interesting and attractive to us that, throughout, we wish to know, what Shakespeare wishes to tell us, namely, what is happening in Hamlet's mind.

And now I can answer, perhaps, that question—How is beauty achieved, where we should not expect it to be achieved, namely through a drama made out of the mental disorder of the hero?

Hamlet is a tragedy, and is beautiful, because of the intensity of value which is expressed in Hamlet himself. There would be no tragedy, and no beauty, if the jangled bells were not sweet, if the reason were not noble, and even sovereign, through all its disorder. That disorder, happening to a common mind or to a mind not valued by the author, might make a

story pathologically interesting, it would not make a great work of art. That "unmistakable tone" which Mr. Eliot finds in *Hamlet* the play, comes from Hamlet himself and is the beauty of his character, which seems to flow out of it and to fill the whole play, seems indeed to be heightened by all contrasting characters. In fact, in *Hamlet*, values are expressed more completely through the presentment of a living man, than in any other play known to us; and that is the secret of its success and also of the many questions asked about it. Shakespeare has always troubled the critics, because he is so thoroughly and so merely the artist; his expression of his values is more embodied than the expression of any other dramatist. Thus, if we ask like Mr. Eliot, or like the Senior Wrangler about *Paradise Lost*, what *Hamlet* proves, there is no answer. It proves nothing, even about human nature; it *is*. human nature. Aristotle or anyone else, if given the plot in a bare outline, might have doubted whether it could be related to any character; but Shakespeare has not merely related it to a character, he has made it the expression of a character; and that

is what puzzles the people who talk about plots by themselves or about psychology by itself. They have forgotten Hamlet himself, who compels us to believe in him and in all the events through which he lives and moves and has his being.

And in *Hamlet* more clearly than in any other play, we can see the justification of tragedy; which is that values can be more fully expressed in it than in comedy. Hamlet himself might be a character of comedy, a Mercutio, almost a melancholy Jacques; but, if he were, we should know and feel far less about him. Even Mercutio is most fully revealed to us, and is most valued by us, in his jests when he is dying; for then we see that his jesting is a part of himself, a reaction both trained and instinctive, and not mere high spirits or ingenuity or ambition of wit. And Hamlet, throughout, is like a man who jests dying; he does not put on an antic disposition but actually expresses suffering in terms of laughter; and this we should not know without his misfortune. It is no wonder that Shakespeare, the artist, should so have valued one who remains himself an artist even

through mental disorder, and is even more of an artist because of it. Hamlet is never, even in the midst of horror, one who must tread a careful and narrow way so that he may not offend. He goes through life with a beautiful wilfulness, dancing rather than trudging; he can relish all kinds of experience, even the disorder of his own mind, because he can express them all. His very talk is a kind of dancing rather than our usual hand-to-mouth jog-trot of words. It reveals an extreme resilience of mind, which instantly transforms whatever happens into a finer expression of itself, with a personal comment always implied or expressed. Compared with other men, he is like a polished pebble by a dull one; all things are more clearly and more beautifully reflected in him.

To express such a character fully, it seems necessary that he should be subjected, not only to external, but to internal misfortune; or rather that external misfortune, of the kind to which he is subjected, must produce mental disorder. Hamlet would not be Hamlet if he dealt with the situation as Othello would deal with it; but, if he is to deal with it in his

own way, we must have his mental disorder exposed to us. Therefore, if such a character as Hamlet is to be tragically treated—and only, if he is tragically, can he be fully treated —he must be treated in Shakespeare's manner. Mr. Eliot and some other critics, I suppose, would say that it is impossible to treat him tragically; the answer is that Shakespeare has done it; and the proof is that he presents Hamlet to us, not only vividly, but always in terms of beauty.

We resent mental disorder in a work of art if it seems to be there only to make our flesh, or our spirit, creep, or if it is misplaced science. We do not resent it in *Hamlet* because it is the necessary result of events, and because Hamlet himself is more clearly revealed to us by means of it. He is never "a case," but always himself; his range of mind, his quickness of transforming comment, are exhibited through his disorder as they could not be otherwise. For the very point of the play, that which interests us and moves us so profoundly, is the fact that he maintains all his graces, even his dancing speech, where other men would be either

broken into silence or turned into mere instruments of revenge. He is neither narrowed nor made dumb, but remains more than ever Hamlet. Take, for instance, his courteous welcome to the players. How much more moving this is in its context, uttered by a man doomed and conscious of his doom, than it would be in a comedy. Or the scene with the recorders. There Hamlet is fantastic; but his fantasy is a triumph of his spirit, his sovereign reason even, over the situation and its effect upon his own mind. "'Tis as easy as lying," he says to Guildenstern; a sentence of comedy implying that for Guildenstern lying is very easy; but Hamlet is triumphant because he can treat a tragic situation as if it were comedy; righteous indignation to Guildenstern would not be half so deadly, or so like Hamlet. And the relation between them enthrals us because it is tragic in a comic guise. Hamlet had made a serious appeal to Guildenstern, but now he knows it was vain; there is nothing in common between them, and he can comment on that fact only comically. It is however the peculiarity and the triumph of Hamlet, the artist,

through all actual calamity, even through his own mental disorder, that he comments always with a bewildering, unexpected, rightness. If we saw him only in comedy, he would be for us undeveloped, like a charming youth who has never been tested in action. But he is tested and keeps his charm even when his behaviour is most outrageous; a proof that in that behaviour his character is revealed. In fact the unity of the play, and that inevitability without which a plot is mere machinery, is made by his character; and we must never criticize the plot without remembering this.

There has been much discussion in the past about the mixture of comedy and tragedy in the Elizabethan drama. It shocked Voltaire, who kept all his sense of propriety for the arts; and certainly, in the plays of Fletcher and lesser men, comedy is sometimes a mere diversion in tragedy and seems to be introduced because the dramatist is not sure that he can keep his audience quiet unless he gives them something to laugh at. But the mixture is justified in *Hamlet* where comedy and tragedy are fused, not only in the play, but in Hamlet himself. He could not be in the solemn

French tragedy; but his drama is more tragic because of the fusion. Hamlet plays for himself the part of Mercutio and maintains it, almost to the end, in the scene with Osric.

Aristotle said that tragedy is more universal than history; and that is true if it means that values can be more directly expressed in it than in history. The historian is concerned rather with telling the truth about matters of fact than with the expression of values; it is a point of honour with him, or should be, not to adapt events or characters to the expression of values. His people are what they are, and he can only comment on the facts which are given to him. But to the dramatist no facts are given, even if he is dealing with history or revising an old play; and he can never defend a failure in the expression of values by saying that he is tied by his material, as the historian can never defend a failure to tell the truth by saying that he has expressed his values. So, if Shakespeare was indeed tied by his material and compelled to write as he would not otherwise have written, he has been particular like a historian where, as a dramatist, he should have

been universal. But the fact that he has so fully expressed his values in *Hamlet* proves that, whatever use he made of the old play, he was not tied to his material, that he wrote as a dramatist, not as a historian.

Unfortunately the saying of Aristotle that tragedy must be universal has been an obstruction both to the experience of dramatic art and to the production of it; for it has made both playwrights and critics forget that a certain kind of particularity is the essence of tragedy, since it becomes real, and so moving, only as its characters are real. One may say indeed that, while in comedy characters may be generic, in tragedy they must be specific. Racine moves us most when his characters are specific, are individuals, in spite of his generalized manner of writing; his peculiar power is to reveal individuals through this generalized speech. But there is nothing generalized in the speech of Hamlet, where it is most moving, most tragic even. He does at times talk Elizabethan rhetoric, as in the scene with his mother, especially in the first part of the speech—"Look here, upon this picture, and on this." But elsewhere he has

a peculiar style, as he has a peculiar character, of his own.

Sure, he that made us with such large discourse
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on the event,—
A thought which, quartered, hath but one part
wisdom
And ever three parts coward,—I do not know
Why yet I live to say, "This thing's to do,"
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and
means,
To do't.

In that we seem to hear the very voice of Hamlet; and, I think, Shakespeare made a great advance in this play in the development of his blank verse because he was trying to express the particularity of Hamlet, to put into poetry his changes of mood, his vividness, his caprice, all that another writer would have left to prose. He has, both in style and in conception, poetized here a richer and more diverse content than had ever been poetized in the drama before; and the very capacities of blank verse and of the English language were enlarged by his success. But he made a

yet greater advance. The place of *Hamlet* in the series of Shakespeare's plays is not certain. Mr. E. K. Chambers, in his conjectured chronology of the plays in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, gives it to the year 1601 with *Twelfth Night*, placing it two years after *Julius Cæsar*, a year before *Troilus and Cressida*, and two years before *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*. It is, by general consent, the first of the four great tragedies, and so the first of those plays which place Shakespeare among the chief poets of the world. Reading it after the comedies, or *Henry IV.* and *Henry V.*, or even *Julius Cæsar*, we are aware of a change in Shakespeare's mind more easily noticed than described. Before this change he had aimed at dramatic success and achieved it, often by the easiest way. The play had been the thing for him always, something outside himself which he had to make, as a craftsman makes an object of use. And in making his plays, in drawing his characters, he had, in the main, accepted the standards of the world, not obsequiously, but a little thoughtlessly, as if he were too much occupied with the task of making his plays to ask how he himself valued

the characters in them. It was enough for him to draw those characters as Titian drew his figures in a great sacred composition, magnificently but not very intimately, and with an eye to the composition itself more than to the individuals composing it. There are, of course, exceptions from the first, characters who seem to be there because he himself is interested in them. There is Berowne in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*; Richard II., an artist himself and a mouthpiece for poetry which runs away with the play; the melancholy of Antonio in the *Merchant of Venice*; Falstaff, a mouthpiece of humour which overpowers everything; Beatrice, who is too much alive compared with every one else in *Much Ado* except Benedick; and Brutus, who seems to be doubtfully drawn as if Shakespeare himself doubted what kind of man he was. Some of these seem to be drawn from real men or women; but there is not one of them, not even Richard II., who compels the play to be what it is. But in *Hamlet* Shakespeare set himself a different task and wrote with a different kind of interest. It is not the play, as a composition, that concerns him, but one

particular man, as he is affected by the events and the other characters of the play. It is not that he has tried to draw an ideal character; if he had done that he would have yawned over the task; nor is it that he makes of Hamlet his own mouthpiece, though he does that sometimes. Hamlet is not drawn from himself, though we may be sure that he could not have drawn Hamlet's disorder except from some mental experience of his own. But Hamlet has come to life for him as no character had ever come to life before in any drama whatever; there is in him a peculiarity of values never before attempted. Hamlet himself means to us a certain way of feeling, thinking, and acting, of which the world had not before been aware and which it has valued ever since. You may say indeed that every man, at least of a certain order of mind, is Hamlet to himself; and that, not merely so that he may excuse to himself his own irresolutions, but because what we value in Hamlet is, not his actions, but his attitude to life. The hero is commonly the man who does things, and the things he means to do; but most of us secretly resent his glorification, as in Henry V., because we

feel that, in real life, he is rewarded for a simplicity that comes often of lack of experiencing power.

But, in Hamlet, what Shakespeare values and makes us value is an extreme of experiencing power which, while it may produce the symptoms of irresolution, is not irresolution. In Hamlet there is neither uncertainty nor poverty of values; it is because his values are so rich and strong that he experiences all things so fully; and because he experiences them fully, he is more hurt by the calamity that befalls him than the common hero would be. But his hurt also is of a peculiar kind; the very calamity, beginning as external, becomes internal; his mind cannot adjust itself to the world of the court, as he finds it, or to life itself, since the world of the court is part of life. It is not merely conscience but his sovereign reason that rebels and is shaken by its own rebellion. The common hero, in such a case, would do something more effective; in a tragedy he would be killed doing it, and the tragedy would consist of his death. But Hamlet's tragedy is his life after he has learned the truth from the Ghost; and it consists in

the fact that, by his very virtues, moral, intellectual and æsthetic, he is prevented from doing anything effective. It is the tragedy of "Captive good attending captain ill"; and yet we are sure that this very capacity for suffering is more to be valued than the common hero's effectiveness. We may not be able to say why; we may, when the spell of Hamlet is no longer upon us, even ask why he does not act like the common hero; but, so long as we are under his spell, we do value him, not in terms of what he does, but in terms of himself.

In *Hamlet* there is the first vivid and complete representation of a kind of character which still bewilders and fascinates us, the character, namely, which possesses, and expresses itself in terms of, an incessant double consciousness. Hamlet is one of those who are aware, not only of the desires, purposes, pleasures, and pains of the moment, but also of their own permanent attitude to all things, and of a general situation, not only of themselves but even of the universe. It is not that he is a professed philosopher or critic, but that his mind works, not like the minds of most men in unison, but in harmony and so, sometimes, in

discord. All his thoughts, feelings, words, actions even, are richer than those of other men because of the accompaniment supplied by his permanent attitude, and the implied comment of that attitude on all that happens to him. Such men fascinate us by a superior disinterestedness, intellectual rather than moral; they seem to be not merely themselves, but a larger intellectual conscience contemplating themselves and all things. They are commonest in the most civilized societies, impossible perhaps among savages, and rare in simple, impulsive ages like the Elizabethan; but always, when they appear and play a part in history, they arouse a peculiar interest even in those who least understand them. Julius Cæsar seems to have been such a man; and that is why he interests us so much more than other able men of action, such as Cromwell or Napoleon, with only a single consciousness; and why Shakespeare's Cæsar, who has no double consciousness, disappoints us. Another example, nearer to our own time, is Disraeli, and we forgive in him what we would not forgive in the single consciousness of Gladstone.

We may be puzzled by the value we put

upon this double consciousness, but it is to us a prophecy of a higher state of being, of men who shall escape permanently from the narrowing tyranny of the struggle for life, who shall be artists and philosophers even while engaged in that struggle, concerned not only to succeed in this or that but at the same time to live a continuous life of thought and expression. We value such a man above, even, specialized artists or philosophers, who may be beings of simple consciousness, because he is what they do, and does, however imperfectly, achieve that fusion of the æsthetic and intellectual with the practical which is the lasting ideal of the human mind. The greatest example of this fusion known to us in history is Christ, and, in literature, Hamlet; and we have the same deep, if bewildered, interest in both. We feel about both—that they understand; and so Shakespeare himself, in *Hamlet*, becomes for us the poet who understands, not merely the great but specialized artist of the earlier plays. He is also, of course, a greater artist because, possessed by his own passionate value for this kind of character whom he has introduced into art, he has been able to devise a drama, unlike

any former drama, which will express that character in all its unity and diversity. The very discord of the double consciousness, caused by Hamlet's calamity, reveals, as nothing else could, its underlying and implied harmony. There is still the permanent attitude, the passionate disinterestedness, maintained in the face of a hideous, pressing, duty; the fusion of the intellectual and the æsthetic with the practical, even when the practical is so fatally in conflict with them. And the tragedy of Hamlet, a tragedy possible only to the double consciousness, consists in this conflict between the permanent attitude and the practical task, and in the vain effort to recover that harmony which, to such minds, is a necessity of life. "Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart"—Hamlet says just before the end; and Horatio advises—"If your mind dislike anything, obey it"; he does not understand that Hamlet's mind is not at odds with any particular thing, that he is commenting, not on a task of the moment, but on a permanent condition, which can be ended only by death.

To judge such a tragedy by tragedies of

external circumstance, to expect to understand Hamlet's motives as easily as those of Othello or Coriolanus, is to misunderstand. It is nearer to the tragedy of Macbeth than to any other, because Macbeth is forced, by a crime far below the level of his character, into a conflict between himself and all his immodest tasks, and so into a permanent condition that can be ended only by death. But in Macbeth the double consciousness, what there is of it, is evoked by his crime and the discord of his nature which it causes. In Hamlet it is there always, and we become more and more aware of it, in all its beauty and subtlety, with every event of the play.

So the play does for us, in an extreme degree, what it is the function of all art to do for us. It gives us the sense of values apart from all consequences, all practical issues, as that sense is given to us by a great tune. In that consists the liberating power of art; it makes for us a kind of experience in which we do not need to look before or after, in which what *is* is also expressed, and so directly, that we can value it directly. Hamlet, expressed for us by Shakespeare, is charged for us with

Shakespeare's values. They ring in his speech, and the emotion of the creator sounds in the music of the creature, so that often the play seems to escape from itself and to become a hymn of the beauty of the human mind triumphing over all odds.

In one place Hamlet is his own chorus and seems prophetic of his commentators—

> Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from the lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.

There remains a mystery after all that we can say; but we shall not pluck out its heart by trying to prove that it is no mystery. As Mr. Robertson says: "You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear"; and not even Shakespeare could have made Hamlet out of a play of Kyd's.

APPENDIX

Did Hamlet delay to kill the King?

EVEN the fact of delay has been denied. Mr. Robertson, after speaking of "the singular unanimity, preserved down to our own day, with which the critics of all schools have taken for granted that Hamlet does in a remarkable way delay his revenge," continues thus—"All the while, unless we decide that Hamlet's duty, after hearing the Ghost's tale, is to proceed instantly to slay the King, there has been as little delay as may well be. It is solely as regards the interval between Acts I. and II. that a charge can be laid. . . . But it is not upon this interval, or upon Hamlet's quiescence therein, that the stress of criticism has fallen." But he adds, with his usual fairness—"One thing must be said for the critics. Shakespeare himself has in a manner given them their warrant, by the two vivid soliloquies in which he makes Hamlet impeach himself." He then proceeds to explain this

impeachment away as being partly the result of a cue from the old play—(which does not survive)—and partly of Shakespeare's own idiosyncrasy of idealistic disregard of time. This explanation I do not understand.

But an American critic, Professor Stoll (in his *Hamlet: an Historical and Comparative Study*, published by the University of Minnesota), maintains that Hamlet does not seriously impeach himself. His object is to prove that Hamlet is not an unusual or novel character at all, but the typical hero of a typical revenge play, very like Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy.* In such plays, he says, the hero reproaches himself for delay, and others reproach him, to keep up the interest of the story. "As a motive or link in a story the device, though a makeshift, is not uncommon." Professor Stoll quotes the lines—

Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on the event,—
A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward,—I do not know
Why yet I live to say, "This thing's to do,"
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means,
To do't.

And then proceeds with these astonishing remarks: "Here again the charge is unmade

in the making. Here, though there is more analysis, Hamlet himself accepts none of the alternatives that offer. He 'does not know'; he has 'will and strength and means to do it.' These are the last words, and it is they that stick in our minds. Shakespeare will not suffer him after all, to testify against himself. What he does is to let Hamlet pull himself together."

But the "last words," quoted by Professor Stoll are not the last words of the soliloquy. Hamlet is preaching resolution to himself, as elsewhere. He rambles on and on, in a manner peculiar to himself among Shakespeare's characters, and a few lines further on asks himself—

How stand I then,
That have a father killed, a mother stained,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep?

And he may well ask; for, after the play-scene has made him certain of the King's crime, he is on his way to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It is that fact which causes him, in this soliloquy, to contrast himself with Fortinbras, and to cry—

How all occasions do inform against me.

If Shakespeare here is "letting Hamlet pull himself together," that is what he is doing throughout the play; and at the end of it

Hamlet does not pull himself together but is forced to act. He kills the King only because the King has contrived his own death.

It is no wonder that Mr. Eliot, after reading Mr. Robertson and Professor Stoll, and accepting their view, calls the play a failure. If Professor Stoll is right, it is one, and all the interest which generations have found in it, and in the character of Hamlet, is based upon a misunderstanding. Hamlet is a perfectly straightforward hero, or ruffian, of a melodrama, who talks to prolong it, saying what neither he nor his creator means, because that is the manner in which such plays are prolonged.

But now consider the facts. After the first Act we should expect the theme of Hamlet's revenge, so clearly stated, to be in the foreground. But what happens? In the second Act, for some time, Hamlet does not appear at all; there is only talk of his strange behaviour, which, if it has any dramatic purpose at all, must be meant to heighten our expectation of that behaviour. Then, at last, Hamlet appears "reading," and behaves strangely to Polonius. There follows the interview with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and then the interview with the Players; and still there is no hint of revenge. But the moment Hamlet is alone,

at the very end of the Act, he falls to reproaching himself for his delay with the words—"Now I am alone."

It would be impossible to insist upon the fact of the delay more strongly, or upon Hamlet's strange state of mind. But even then he is reminded of his duty by the artistic emotion of the Player; and he hits upon the device of the play so that he may convince himself that the Ghost was not a devil come to abuse him. Mr. Robertson says that the critics have not insisted upon the delay between Acts I. and II. (which appears to have been about two months); but Hamlet insists upon it and reproaches himself with frenzy. Professor Stoll quotes the words—

Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?
Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face?
Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i' the throat,
As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?

and then remarks, "Echo answers—Who? and he rouses himself and shakes off the slanders he has been showering upon himself, like the true and sensible man that he is." But does he? The soliloquy continues—

Swounds, I should take it; for it cannot be
But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall
To make oppression bitter.

Then he falls to abusing the King, and, finally, compares himself to a whore that unpacks her heart with words. I am tempted to wonder about Professor Stoll, as about Mr. Eliot, whether he has read the play on which he comments so strangely.

Act III. begins again with wonder about Hamlet's state of mind. There follows the play-scene; Hamlet's refusal to kill the King at his prayers; the interview with his mother; the death of Polonius, which certainly proves that Hamlet has no scruples about killing the King; the appearance of the Ghost, who speaks of his almost blunted purpose; his dispatch to England by the King's orders; and the soliloquy on the way, in which he contrasts himself with Fortinbras. When Mr. Robertson says that a charge of delay can be laid solely as regards the interval between Acts I. and II., he must forget this journey to England. Professor Stoll does not forget it but maintains that Hamlet "is in custody, and a man is not considered feeble or incapable because he does not fight the police when arrested." But the play itself says nothing of this; indeed elsewhere Professor Stoll himself remarks—"The King fears him, and shrinks from bringing him to account for Polonius' death." In the play, the King tells Hamlet

that he must go to England for his special safety and Hamlet instantly answers—"Good," in spite of the fact that thereby he is indefinitely delaying his revenge. Twice he says "Come, for England!" and departs gaily with those words, leaving the King safe on his throne; while the King, so far from using or threatening force, says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern — "Tempt him with speed aboard." Shakespeare, even if he was writing a commonplace melodrama, was not utterly incompetent at that. If he had meant us to believe that Hamlet went to England because he was forced and in custody, he would have made that fact, and not the contrary, appear in the behaviour of Hamlet and the King. Nor would he have made Hamlet himself insist, in the next scene, that he had strength and means to take his revenge (which would have been untrue if he was in custody), but that he was failing to take it through his own fault.

Then Professor Stoll, dropping the custody theory, says that Hamlet falls in with his deportation as part of his plan. Hardly as part of his plan to kill the King! And he maintains that, after the soliloquy, "How all occasions do inform against me"—"the neglect and delay are over and done with." But are they? When Hamlet appears again in the

Grave-digger's scene in Act V., he says nothing of his revenge, but discourses at length about death and dissolution—a discourse which is only cut short by the appearance of the King with Ophelia's funeral. Here, as elsewhere, it needs an external reminder to recall him to his revenge. Then, in Scene II., he is again maintaining to Horatio that he has a right to kill the King, arguing all over again the same old question. To which the practical Horatio replies—

> It must be shortly known to him from England,
> What is the issue of the business there—

meaning that Hamlet must be quick about it. To this Hamlet replies that he will be quick about it—

> It will be short; the interim is mine—

and then falls, with his usual irrelevance, to regretting his treatment of Laertes. Then follows the interview with Osric in which Hamlet again forgets everything in his ridicule of Osric; then the short scene in which he expresses his foreboding of the end; and then the end with a rush.

I have spoken of Hamlet's irrelevance; and this is more obvious, more insisted upon by Shakespeare, than his delay. All the brilliance and subtlety of his character are

shown in that irrelevance; but, if it is insisted upon merely to prolong the action and because it is proper to the hero of a revenge play, then indeed the world has been mistaken about *Hamlet*. My answer to those, if there are any besides Mr. Eliot, who are convinced by Professor Stoll, is—Read *The Spanish Tragedy*. If then they think that *Hamlet* is a play of the same kind, with the same devices and motives, there is no more to be said. But since few readers, I think, are likely to be convinced by Professor Stoll, I have dealt with his theory in an appendix.

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